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JOHN ADOLPHUS,
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EXTRACTS FROM HIS DIARIES.
By his daughter,
MRS. HENDERSON.

THE ARRANDEL MOTTO.

A NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MARK HARDCASTLE.

"I will not be revenged, and this I owe to my enemy; but I will remember,
and this I owe to myself."—COZZON.



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THE ARRANDEL MOTTO.

CHAPTER I.

IF HESSIE was glad, as she had said, to be among these warm, kind friends, they were equally glad to have her. The house seemed brighter and cheerier, they thought, than it had ever been before the pretty, restless figure and sweet face came to move about it. She took her place at once with the ready grace and tact which she so pre-eminently possessed; and by her quick sympathy and tenderness of hurting or neglecting, won every heart in the household.

Aunt Phyllis, even before the first twenty-

four hours of her stay were over, began wondering what they should do without her. Mrs. Goldsmith's warm, motherly heart took her into its very deepest recess. As for Pollie, her quiet little face seemed brimming over with happiness, and Roley grew morbidly jealous.

The extraordinary preparations for the party elicited hearty laughter all over the house, and Hester's highly original designing and festooning were interrupted continually (especially the startling "Welcome," to be suspended in the little hall), by a laughter which quite incapacitated Pollie; between her amusement, when they would not stick up, and her admiration when they would.

At last the two girls looked round complacently to see everything ready and complete in the firelight. Hessie stirred the fire to a brighter blaze; Pollie lighted the lamp. Hessie said—

"Will it do now?"

And Pollie, in the same breath, said—

"Now it will do."

Then there was nothing more to be said or done until the guests arrived—but wait.

“Of course,” said Pollie, “the first rap will announce two guests. I never remember a solitary one coming first, and I’m sure there is some understanding among them to this effect.”

So they did. Two of them coming in—pattens, umbrellas and all—like a genial breath of the wide frosty world without, carrying, each one, a basket gingerly covered with a clean handkerchief, under which lay, in careful preservation, the Cap. Sometimes so preserved from year to year, for Pollie said she had known the same cap arrive so for nine years together, and not look seriously aged in the ninth.

Pre-eminently, the first great feature of every New Year’s evening was the bringing to light of the cap. If it chanced to be a new one the burden of hope and anxiety was too great to be calmly borne by the possessor, and her intensely conscious expression added tenfold to its striking appearance.

If the cap chanced to be an old one,—or rather one from which the gloss of novelty had departed,—there was a shade of pique discernible in the glance which the wearer would throw upon others of more recent date.

Old Mrs. Choosan first began the disinterestment of her cap on this night; slowly folding the red handkerchief which served as an awning, that she might prolong the excitement of Pollie, who hovered over the basket, taking cautious peeps into the corners.

“Why, I declare, Choosan, it is a new one,” she exclaimed, with the utmost surprise, as it came forth; having read that fact long ago in Choosan’s beaming face.

“’Tis a new un this time, Miss Mary,” she answered, with an abortive attempt at *sang froid*, “do you like it?”

Now as all Choosan’s caps had been made on the same principle for all the years Pollie had known her—viz., with two broad, oblong blocks of border sticking well out with a solidity of their own, and forming a margin to

each cheek ; the back being a very secondary consideration, and not worthy of any amount of serious thought—Pollie had great difficulty in showing herself struck by its novelty. But she decided emphatically that it was becoming, and as Choosan knew this comprehended all that is desired in a cap, she glanced across rather pityingly at Mrs. Breeze. Bright, beaming, rubicund Susan Breeze, whose basket was still uncovered under Hester's hand, and who declined to hear Choosan at all.

But her momentary cloud of jealousy turned to a perfect ripple of delight when, as the three-years'-old cap was displayed, Hessie exclaimed upon its brilliance.

"Do ye know, miss," said Susan, pulling out the loops with ineffable tenderness, "it's a old cap."

"Do you really mean it?" asked Hester, examining it with her head on one side, "why I quite fancied I could tell a new cap when I saw it."


"It does look a'most like a new cap, don't it, miss? but my boy bought it me nigh four years ago, of his first wage."

It was on by this time, a perfect bower of roses round the honest, comely face; and these two guests were ushered in for Mrs. Goldsmith and Miss Robarts to entertain, while Pollie answered another rap. This was Molly Bent; her little, gentle, wrinkled face rosy as a winter apple, and the cap (from which her little, flat, grey curls peeped) of so substantial a nature that it bore the big black bonnet over it, and was as fresh when that was taken off as it could ever have been, with a broad black ribbon round it, as if Molly had felt the wind in her ears after she had put it on.

Good little Molly Bent! As rosy she was in face and in heart as if she had not a poor old bedridden husband at home for whom she toiled all day, and who never left off groaning and fretting from sunrise to sunset. As warm and genial as if she never sat over an empty grate, or got up in those bitter nights to give

her thin, worn blanket to the poor old shivering man who never shivered the less for this one only possible addition to his comfort—or rather subtraction from his discomfort. As cheerfully, brisk, and active as if the days were not long hours of hard, rough work, and the nights often longer hours of wakefulness and nursing. As brave and hopeful still as if her seventy years had taught her nothing but a sweet and glad content; a humble, patient, resting on the love of Him who hath said, "Blessed be ye poor."

Following closely on the heels of little Molly, came Martha Jones, with her bobbing curtsey which made Hessie fancy she had intended to "flop," like Mrs. Jerry Cruncher, and changed her mind suddenly; with her long black bonnet—the material in which, Pollie reckoned, would have made her and Hester eleven each—and with the long blue cloth cloak which had been given her twenty years ago and worn through every winter since, and the remembrance of which had



shamed Aunt Phyllis that very Autumn when she had begun to think she required a new waterproof.

In she came in her pattens, clattering equally with them and her busy little tongue; deftly taking off her cloak and pattens with her left hand, as she had learnt to do everything since her right had been cut off some few sad years before. A needle that had been left in a curtain she was washing, had worked its way into her palm; and, after months of agony, as she told Hester that night, the Infirmary surgeon had taken it carefully off, and it was better so, and she was growing quite handy; but, Hessie thought, it was but left-handly after all.

Of course Martha's bonnet was a fixture. The extensive satin bow at the top proclaimed this at once; and Hessie took her into the dining-room while Pollie ushered in—last, but emphatically not least—Miss Jemima Kimble; tall, stately, deaf, and wavering in her mind.

Poor Miss Kimble was in what she called reduced circumstances; but if such a reduction extends to the valuation of oneself, it was a very doubtful one in her case. "She had been so different," she used to lament. What a blessing for the companions of her childhood and youth! "She had seen so much better days," and of course that satisfactory thought effectually blinded her to the good of these.

No one knew what these better days of Jemima's had been; no one ever remembered her different from what she was; but the romance gave her such gloomy satisfaction, and elevated her so unquestionably in the eyes of herself, that no one disputed it. And the low born neighbours (whose "better days" perhaps were only to come!) kindly and gently bore her patronage, though they might laugh sometimes at the poor thing's eccentricities, and never hesitated to help her: never grumbled that her thanks were not forthcoming, though now and then one

of them would give her a few sharp words. Many a time would little Molly, tired and aching in every limb, call in and do Miss Kimble's heavy work while she lay in bed. And hearty, kindly Mrs. Breeze, on many a Sunday morning, would divide the little dinner at home; pretend to eat her share while the young mouths were busy and the eager loving eyes were watching her; then quietly slip her plate away, and take it in to poor Jemima, as "a little bit that was too much, that we put away for you to taste how you like it cooked in this way."

Miss Kimble, having relinquished her shawl and bonnet, stood opposite the girls with folded arms; a very extraordinary figure, indeed; just the same width all the way down, and robed in a short, chintz muslin skirt of an uncertain age, and a long, tight, rusty, alpaca jacket, edged with a limp tucker, which refused to stick up and conceal her long, thin neck. But the little yellow knot of hair on the top of her head, about the size

of a crown (and here we would be distinctly understood to mean a five shilling piece), though it looked so unnaturally lofty, was not an atom higher than were Pollie's and Hester's ohignons.


"Come, Miss Kimble," shouted Pollie, as Jemima pulled out and arranged the six short yellow curls which trembled on her temples, "they are only waiting for you."

And when she was shut in, the girls began to work in earnest.

"Mr. Delahoyde's curate said of Sir Randal Platt that he had 'rather a high complexion,' Pollie. I wonder what he would have called mine now," laughed Hessie ; but she clung to the toasting-fork, while Pollie buttered the cakes as fast as they were ready.

The pyramids were piled, and in went the girls with the tea and the hot cakes, at sight of which Hessie noticed the mouths water, and heard an expectant sniff from Miss Jemima crushed in its prime.

But Hester—wide and quizzical as her eyes




were that evening—saw nothing of the wonder and admiration caused by the attendance and attention of the beautiful lady who had such pleasant words to say to them all, and whose tiny white hands were so willing to wait on them.

If a smoking board means a table with hot dishes upon it (which very rarely *do* smoke), then it was round the smoking board that the five guests assembled with Anne at their head; the ladies waiting to see them settled.

Hessie saw Anne trying to put her mother (Mrs. Breeze) into the background, as if she felt the responsibility of her position; and saw too the perfect impossibility of success in the manœuvre. Susan would crop up everywhere as the most prominent figure in the group. She saw poor old Jemima draw her easy chair to the table, spread a large pocket-handkerchief on her highly-developed chintz knee, and express by an easy sniff that she had nothing to complain of so far. Then Hester saw her obligingly help herself to

muffin, regardless of Anne's pantomimic reminders of "grace before meat." Mrs. Goldsmith did not stand among her standing company just at the crisis when the tea would be hottest and strongest, and sing with them a verse of a hymn, long metre by nature, longer metre by suspension; but in half-a-dozen words she begged a blessing on them all, leaving the muffins out of the question; and when that was over they sat down in quiet content, and Pollie shut the door gently upon them. Then the girls went back to the kitchen, and Mrs. Goldsmith and Aunt Phyllis rested in the drawing-room, where Roley sulked majestically on the rug, that being the warmest and most undisturbed spot he could select for the purpose.

Stopping in their talk every now and then to listen delightedly to the involuntary laughter or low chuckles that reached them from the next room, Pollie and Hester—toasting still—sat over the fire discussing their guests. No need to tell how many times



Pollie went in to replenish the plates, or Hessie took in fresh supplies of tea. Suffice it to say that when the meal was over and the guests had gathered round the fire again, Mrs. Choosan, who was more outspoken and independent than the others, confided to Hester that "*it was a good tea, and so had ought to be; as it lasted them a whole year, and they'd never another like it.*"

When the six chairs were comfortably arranged round the fire, and Anne was playing the hostess and taking care of everyone, Hester and Pollie carried their own tea into the drawing-room, much to Aunt Phyllis's enjoyment; and there they all partook of it merrily, Hessie balancing her saucer on her fingers in imitation of Choosan, and Pollie delighted by setting aside ceremony and taking her tea to the rug.

"You are enjoying it so much, Pollie," laughed her mother, "that I shall never get you back to your guests."

"Come, Pollie," said Hester, having finished

her own tea, "your nose is growing brilliantly red, and will soon have an 'incomprehensible sheen' upon it, like Dickens' Italian friend, if you stay there encouraging the warmth and somnolence of which that will be an emblem. Come."

Then began the usual evening's entertainment; and gay as the guests might have been while left alone, Hester noticed that they looked eagerly for the ladies to go back, and Choosan, as spokeswoman, welcomed them.

"Ah! we like it a deal better with ye amongst us, and I'll let ye have yer own chair, missis,"

But missis would not hear of this, and Choosan, no way unwilling, sat on; as easy as the chair itself, as much at home upon it as if they had grown old together.

Then Jemima rose majestically out of the other arm-chair, but still less would Mrs. Goldsmith see that, and she too slowly resumed her position, which was as stiff and upright a one as could well be imagined, and


made Hessie fancy the rusty jacket might be made of sheet-iron, and that the crisp curls might come off with any bend or jerk.

Martha sat herself down close to Hessie, her head on one side like a little cock sparrow's, the big bow nodding at any pause in the conversation. Seeing this, Jemima nodded too, and though it might not be at appropriate intervals, the nods were a decided improvement on the normal rigidity. Susan, still prominent, filled her position both practically and metaphorically to advantage; and as the evening advanced Hessie fancied that the flowers in her cap literally expanded and opened on the genial soil. Quite in one corner, on the other side of Hester, placid and quiet, sat little Molly, her small thin hands folded in her lap and her big cloth boots set in the first position below her short lilac calico skirt.

So they sat, sometimes chatting in groups, sometimes talking altogether a little more earnestly, sometimes whispering a few serious, heartfelt words, sometimes sending a joke

through the circle and breaking into a hearty laugh, which might have been weak and uncalled-for in women whose lives had so much earnest in them and so little play, but which made the work no harder perhaps on the morrow, and certainly made the play more healthful for this one day.

Of course the songs came in their course, the old, old songs, for it was very rarely indeed that a new one was attempted. Now and then it happened that an ambitious radical guest would volunteer a new song, and go swimmingly through the first and second verses, perhaps indeed the third, when symptoms of floundering became evident, and the faces of the company would grow anxious and concentrated as they ransacked their memories or inventions for a next line. But to give the necessary impetus it was advisable to go back to the very beginning of the song, so that the introductory stanzas were generally rendered as many times as there were guests, and grew painfully familiar to the audience.



Still each one, with perhaps a faint exception, stopped at the original halting place in the middle of the verse, the faint exception possibly passing that, and then foundering more hopelessly and irretrievably than all.

So the old songs still remained pre-eminent, though they never came spontaneously by any means. There was more pressing and persuading required than Hessie had ever seen in any party before, and more coughing and clearing of the throat from each one than Mr. Leslie's choir ever indulged in as a body.

But they always came at last; the old songs which they pretended they could not sing;—just as we do ourselves sometimes, at Claribel's instigation;—and the chorus consisting of a repetition of the first verse at every pause, followed invariably.

Susan was, as usual, requested to begin, and after some difficulty she was induced to consent. Slowly plaiting her apron in her fingers, and fixing one particular coal in the

grate, she told (as it was her custom to tell them annually), how she and someone who was never particularly mentioned, met 'twas in a crowd; how she lost her breath when his eyes were upon her; and how well aware she was of what he felt, by the effect on his deep-toned voice; ending each verse by energetically assuring the company that her mother was the cause of the anguish, which did not appear to be affecting her in the slightest.

After various compliments and encouraging remarks, Martha was prevailed upon to sing her standard song; sorely against her principle it would seem, while she had as little idea of going home without having sung it as she had of going without her supper. Hessie listened with wrapt attention—

“‘Ere’s the rock, the broo-oo-ook, the tree,
Ark! ark! a voice. Do you thi-i-ink ’tis ee?”
(Pause of several moments.)

“‘It is not tee, and the night is coming gon;
O where’s my lovely wandreer gone?
It is not tee, and the night is coming gon;
O where’s my lovely wandreer gone?
O where’s my lovely wandreer gone?
Wandreer gone?
Dreer gone?”

This song was received as usual with hearty applause, and the above verse, which composed the chorus, was vociferously joined in. Then it was Jemima's turn, and her song came without a descent from her elevated, stony attitude.

At first Hester thought the familiar words were set to a Gregorian chant; but, as it went on, she was obliged to own to herself that Gregorians were much more lively, and not one she had ever heard could have made such a sustained wail of the pathetic assertion that "*she* never bullamed him, ne-ev-ver; but—received him when he came."

Choosan and Molly declined to sing, and meant it. "It's very well for those as are singers," Choosan said, "but I never found as I was, and I don't intend to begin to be one, now in my years."

So after this the turn came to the other side of the house, and Aunt Phyllis graciously accorded *her* standard song, "O Nanny, wilt thou gang wi' me?" and won her standard laurels.

Then Pollie being called upon, blushed and laughed and would not, having a strange feeling of shyness before Hester; though she only remembered the child's quick talent, and intense love for music, and how she used to sing so purely about the rooms at Lorne House, shocking the elder girls with her daring light-heartedness. Hester, seeing that, however laughable it might be, Pollie was thoroughly in earnest, left off persuading her, and agreed readily when the eager request was made (rather more humbly) to herself. She sang at once, with a piquancy which made them all laugh over the words, while they tried to keep a breathless silence that they might not miss a single note. And as the refrain came again and again, the first note of it was, greeted by a pleased little nod from each.

“ For there's nae luck about the house,
There's nae luck at a';
There's little pleasure in the house,
When my good man's awa'.”

And then, at their pleading request, she

sang a quaint old Christmas carol, which charmed them all; especially Pollie.

After the songs it was nearly time for Mrs. Goldsmith to read and pray with them, as she always did before supper; but just at this particular crisis there was heard a long, quiet knocking at the outer door, and Pollie, in her capacity of waitress, went to open it.

She seemed to be a long time away, while they were all wondering what the voices and steps outside could mean. When she opened the door at last it was to announce, in a voice preternaturally grave—

“A late visitor.”

If St. Simeon Stylites, pillar and all, had suddenly walked into the midst of these guests, they could not have been more taken by surprise than they were when they saw this late visitor, who stood as high as the door itself. A figure in a close white cap, with Molly's deep black bonnet over it; a long blue cloak, and short white apron; a figure carrying a basket covered with care, but from the

cover of which, on one side, Roley's face peeped forth complacently. This figure picked its way slowly along in the pattens which added so ominously to its natural six feet, and curtsyed profoundly to Mrs. Goldsmith ; itself the very incarnation of respectful gravity though the laughter rang around. Molly looked up as if she were contemplating the summit of Mont Blanc, screwing up her little toothless face in excessive laughter. Then she gave an elongated sigh, which Mrs. Goldsmith, in her laughter, said meant—"It won't be fit to wear after this," and applied to the bonnet ; but which Lord Leaholme, from inside the bonnet, said meant—"I wish it looked as well on me."

Every item of this ludicrous figure had been laughed over, before it was thoroughly understood that Pollie had brought in another guest. But then the greeting to Hugh was warm and heartfelt.

Hester's laugh was as merry as anyone's ; her reception of Hugh, perhaps, the most

frank and genial of all; yet the one great throb her heart had given when she saw how gay and happy was the face that looked at her from its odd disguise, seemed to have killed the bright, new hope that had been struggling within her.

CHAPTER II.

THE Earl of Leaholme (in his own dress only now), sat among Mrs. Goldsmith's guests; enjoying the fun he had caused; amusing the ladies of the house, and joking with the old women; but never arrogating to himself the conversation; on the contrary, as Hessie noticed, simply helping it for the others. And then she felt, as she had never felt before, what a true nobleman he was; not that she was thinking of his rank, but of that true nobility which teaches us to love as brethren, to be pitiful, and to be courteous. Mrs. Goldsmith, in placid enjoyment, folded her dimpled fingers, and put

off her reading. Aunt Phyllis fluttered on her chair, and tittered irresistibly. Hugh, with his quiet gentlemanliness and clerical appearance, did not win half so much attention, or provoke half so much interest as Leaholme did; even before the listening ears had caught his name, and it was whispered that this handsome, funny gentleman was really the great Earl of whom they had all heard, and whose beautiful castle they had all seen.

Hester, in the midst of her own talk, heard him drawing out Miss Jemima, asking her questions relevant and irrelevant, and telling her odds and ends of news that were emphatically news to her. This, of course, she could not help but overhear in the raised voice which it was necessary to use in conveying anything verbal to Jemima; but she found herself listening too to Jemima's murmured confidences. She heard her tell him that this was the only house at which she visited at now, for she had no other friends.

And when he asked her how that could be, she said the gentry held themselves above her, and so she would not thank them for their visits; that the clergy, if they did come, only came to chirp at her, and that she did not care about the commonalty. And—though Hessie was not supposed to be listening—the laugh danced in her eyes.

She heard him (how quickly her ears would catch his voice!) asking Choosan of her family; and then she heard Choosan's confidences too; how that her husband was but "a poor old piece," and there was for ever and ever of trouble with him and other things; how that she was getting too old for folks to give her much work, but that all the same she couldn't sit down and klem; how that she could make a very little do, providing she had a cup of tea and a clean cap; and that, altogether—though it *was* hard sometimes—plenty of others were worse off, and she "wasn't angry with the Lord Almighty!" Hessie did not catch Leaholme's low answer;

but she heard Choosan's ready, assenting reply—

“Yes, sir, God *is* good. Oh! yes, sir, I always feel—whatever happens—as He does His best.”

Poor Hester! The speech she had been making was stifled, and she tried in vain to regain her gravity. But Molly only thought she was laughing over her stories, and took it as a compliment rather than otherwise; and presently Molly too was talking cheerfully to the Earl.

Mrs. Goldsmith rather shyly began to speak of prayers again, and requested Hugh to take her place. Then they all settled themselves in their seats with a rustle as people do in church after finding the text. After prayers came the hot supper, over which the five mouths watered lusciously, and on which whispered praises were lavishly bestowed.

The Christmas presents of new warm garments were given quietly, one at a time, in the kitchen by Mrs. Goldsmith alone; then

the hearty and heart-felt New Year's wishes were exchanged again, with a good deal of gratitude accompanying them. Pollie held the front door open, and Hessie stood in the little hall re-arranging some of the shawls with an eye to comfort, and finding umbrellas for the owners, and owners for the umbrellas—the last a search not often so eagerly promulgated as the first.


The last good-night was said, and Pollie slipped into Choosan's hand as she passed a little parcel of cold beef for her sickly husband—"the poor old piece."

"It will be a bit of supper for him," said Pollie, almost apologetically, "but it is not much."

"Well, thank ye, miss," replied Choosan, politely, "it 'll do."

Pollie, smiling at the reception of her little surreptitious present, watched her down the street, then turned to Hester with a funny little kiss.

Anne had made such good use of the last



ten minutes that she was actually carrying the supper tray into the drawing room, when the girls shut the outer door. Pollie blushed a little as they followed it in, but then her blushes seemed to have it all their own way that night.

"May we stay to supper, Mrs. Goldsmith?" asked the Earl, with great respect, just as Aunt Phyllis was thinking how stupid it was of Anne to bring it in before Lord Leaholme. "We are rather vagabondish to-night, and as Delahoyde is my guest over Sunday, I ought to try to promote his enjoyment. He has promised to preach at Leaholme in the morning, and perhaps will be careless if I do not oblige him by asking you to let us stay. For myself, it will be an intense pleasure. For him—just look! Did you ever see so much suppressed anxiety on one human countenance before? Do let us stay."

"Miss Roberts," he said, as they drew up to the table, "was it not comical to notice how eagerly your guests pocketed the mince-

pies to-night when Mrs. Goldsmith gave them permission? How easy to see that their hearts were with the hungry ones at home."


"Do they ever attempt to do it without permission?" inquired Hugh.

"It has happened only two or three times. Only two or three times among as many as twenty guests at a time, for more than thirty years."

Hugh looked a little incredulous. Clergyman though he was, there were some simple truths which he had yet to learn among the poor.

"It will be very pleasant always to remember these nights, Mrs. Goldsmith, I should think," said Hessie, her voice very thoughtful, while she raised her eyes full of a quick, bright hope, to Mrs. Goldsmith's face.

"Very," she answered, with a smile, "even when the old faces have faded from our lives—as they will never do from our remembrance, or when our place here shall know us no more save in a few loving hearts."



Then I trust that some one else will perfect what we have been attempting. Some one else will give a little time, a little trouble, and a great, great deal of pleasure, to those who have to bear the burden and heat of the day."

CHAPTER III.

THE music hall was crowding rapidly next night, when the cabman gave a quick, heavy rap at Mrs. Goldsmith's door.

"Cab, please, ladies," he said, rubbing his hands and shaking the snow from the sleeves of his white great coat, as Anne opened the door and disclosed to him the group of ladies in the hall.

Hester, in her black net dress and scarlet opera cloak, was stooping down, that Aunt Phyllis might adjust to her own satisfaction the silver fillagree comb which crowned the dainty little head; laughingly prolonging

the process because Aunt Phyllis seemed to enjoy it.

Mrs. Goldsmith was giving her good-bye kiss to Pollie, who looked very pretty and young with the happy excitement on her face, though her high, white grenadine had seen its best days. At the cabby's summons there was a grand commotion. Anne ran down the steps, escorting each young lady separately to the cab under an umbrella. Another good-night was called, and they were off, two of the brightest, happiest, least critical listeners whom Sims Reeves had that night.


When the concert was over Pollie stood in her seat, letting the people flock past her. "If we wait for the crowd to disperse a little," she said, "it will be better. And yet if we do, Hessie, we shall lose our cab most likely ; the man promised to be there for us, but of course he will go if he gets hired. Oh, I hope he won't."

"Never mind, Pollie, if he does," said Hessie, looking about and enjoying herself very much,

"no one will hurt us, and I believe lots of ladies are here alone. Don't be nervous; how beautiful it has been! I long to try whether I remember that one Italian air. Would the people stare if I sang it now?"

"Come," said Pollie, abstractedly. "Come now, dear." With a rapid change in her lowered voice, Hessie whispered, "Not yet;—not just at this moment—please, Pollie."

Pollie, turning to ask why, saw the Earl of Leaholme coming down the room in the crush, guiding a resplendent old lady on his arm, and looking back just then to answer the remark of a young lady behind them. At that moment he saw the girls—he might have been looking at them all the evening for any surprise there was in the recognition—and bowed low and pleasantly; while a few heads turned inquisitively to see whom he greeted; then his party passed on, and the girls hesitated before following. But they need not have done so, the crowd shut them from each other as effectually as the walls of the hall could have done.



By dint of much patience and more perseverance, they steered their way to the door, and here was confusion and clatter indeed, as the carriages rolled up.

"Whose carriage, ladies?" shouted a policeman, noticing Pollie's anxious look out into the street.

"Oh! it does not matter, thank you," stammered Pollie, feeling very much smaller than she need have done, "we only want our cab."

The man did not seem to think this quite such an important matter as others he had on hand.

"I'll hail it presently, miss," he said, shouting another name almost before the words were over.

"If I could see out there, I should recognize our cabby in a moment," said Hester, "and any man would fetch him."

"This is the worst of being alone," sighed Pollie; "is it not tiresome?"

"I like it," said Hester, merrily, "I think it fun to see the rush and crush."

"Do you, dear? It is only for you that I dislike it."

The crowd in front made way for a tall gentleman who came in from the snowy streets, the light flakes lying thick upon his opera hat.

"Miss Goldsmith, do you not know that a carriage is waiting for you, and that others cannot come up until it has passed?"

"Oh is it?" cried Pollie. "Oh thank you, Lord Leaholme, thank you. We shall soon find it."

"It is first on the line, and the way is covered; you need not fear the snow."

She took the arm he offered, really too much bewildered to refuse, and Hessie followed them through the crowd, thanking him in her heart for taking Pollie.

He handed Pollie in; turned and helped her; closed the door rather hastily; raised his hat a moment, and they were off.

"Oh! Hester," began Pollie, in real alarm, but Hester laughed outright.

"What carriage is it, Pollie? It is very comfortable."

"Lord Leaholme's; how did he manage it?"

"I thought he had been beyond the portico, because of the snow on his hat. I see now he had been to bring this up. We might have known by the servants."

"But he kept them out of sight. No one was at the door but himself."

"I would rather have had the cab," said Hessie, with such sudden gravity that Pollie laughed.

The horses dashed along the quiet street, and were pulled up suddenly at Mrs. Goldsmith's door. Aunt Phyllis came out with Annie to see what the unusual clattering might mean, and stood within the door gasping dangerously.

"Cinderella and one of her uncomfortable sisters, Miss Robarts," said Hessie, shaking the snow flakes from her hair on the steps, "and Cinderella objects to leaving her god-mother's chariot."

The cause of which little assertion was the long time Pollie took to perform the descent of the steps, guided and supported by a balustrade of imposing footman's arm.

How awkwardly during supper Pollie's description of her drive interfered with Hester's description of the singing, and the small snatches she gave of her favourite song! And how they would break in upon each other's tales, until Hester broke off suddenly, and sang a verse of Martha Jones' song from memory, chorus and all, giving it its true originality.

"Ere's the rock, the broo-oo-ook, the tree,
Ark! Ark! a voice. Do you thi-i-ink 'tis ee?
It is not tee, and the night is coming gon,
O! where's my lovely wandreer gone?
It is not tee, and the night is coming gon,
O! where's my lovely wandreer gone?
O! where's my lovely wandreer gone?
Wandreer gone?
Dreer gone?"

And Pollie could tell nothing more for the peals of laughter, which drew abundant tears from Aunt Phyllis, who always laughed till, as she expressed it, "she cried again." Though why—when she had not cried before—she should call it crying again no one quite knew.

CHAPTER IV.

"If you would not mind, Hester," Pollie said, next morning, "we will call on our way to church this afternoon, and see some of our New Year's guests."

And Hester consented very gladly.

Their first visit was to Miss Jemima Kimble, who was suffering from a complaint she called the Sinking, but which, in spite of its name, seemed to cause her to sit even more upright than ever. While they sat in the bare little room, Susan Breeze brought in a mysterious concoction in a bowl, on the top of which reposed a slice of pallid pudding, dotted sparingly with little oases of raisins. Susan did not see the girls until the present was as

good as given, else—judging by the bright, shame-faced blush of the giver—it would not have been presented. Then Jemima looked at it and put it aside. “I suppose you’ve tasted it yourself,” she said; “you know whether it’s good, without my opinion.”

“I liked it very well,” returned Susan, looking modestly conscious of her excellency in the culinary art, and forgetting to make herself heard.

“There wasn’t much flavour in that tea you brought me last, Miss Goldsmith,” said Jemima, turning to Pollie; “hadn’t you better tell your ma she’ll get it better at Clay’s? Johnson’s never agrees with anybody—particularly with me.”

“And we want a good cup of tea to cheer us this Christmas time, don’t we?” said Pollie, kindly.

“Christmas or no Christmas, a bad cup of tea’s always a bad thing,” she answered, sententiously.

Poor Jemima! As the girls turned out of

her small bleak room with Susan, it seemed as if they were taking away from her the only Christmas that could ever reach her.

"We are pretty well used to her odd ways now, Hessie," said Pollie, quietly, "and know how little accountable she is for her ingratitude and discontent. And when I go from some small bright house, with its atmosphere of love and contentment, to her bare apartment, where the air is laden with complaint, I feel that she has brought her bitterest punishment upon herself. Yet who can tell, after all, what glimpses of good may not find their way into those long dreams which the poor creature must fall into during the many hours she sits there alone, dependent, for all she needs, on the charity which angers her?"

"A cheerless hearth," said Hessie sadly, "and yet, would it count for less to our tender Father in Heaven than the loneliest little nest in the loneliest mountain tree in the world? and that we know He guards."

But Pollie, glancing into Susan's face and

thinking of the dinner in the basin, began to regret Jemima's ingratitude.

"Miss Mary," said Susan, her kind eyes growing a little moist, "maybe it's only the blessin' of our 'omes as makes us different. We might all of us be like that if we'd lived for thirty years our lone; doubly lone, because deafness is so lonesome."

"But it is not always so; not even often, Susan."

"When I looked at her this mornin' in her des'late room," Susan went on, "and knew she 'adn't broke her fast all day, and 'adn't sperit to tidy up a bit and make it look like Sunday; and when I saw the gay big parties comin' 'ome from church to their plentiful 'ot dinners, and when I thought, too, of all awaitin' me at 'ome, I was a'most too 'shamed to give her the bit I took—for surely, I thought, there's somethin' a deal better as I ought to tell her of and can't, worth more than meat to the poor soul that's gone so far in poverty that she can't digest the bit she gets. It's

of the old woman, the "Sister" seemed
 a little more human, a little more like the
 "Sister" who had been her friend.
 "I have been thinking of her old ways
 and how she used to be," said the "Sister," "and know
 how she would be for bringing rat-
 tles and such things, and how I go from
 one place to another, and how the atmosphere
 of the old woman is so far apart
 from the new one, and with complaint,
 and how she has brought her bitterest
 pain upon herself. Yet who can tell,
 and how the glances of good may not find
 their way into those long dreams which the
 poor creature must fall into during the many
 hours she sits there alone, dependent, for all
 she needs, on the charity which angers her?"

"A cheerless hearth," said Hattie sadly,
 "and yet, would it count to our
 tender Father in Heaven as the loneliest
 place in the loneliest place in the
 world, and that we know is." "
 "Hollie, glancing at her face and

thinking of the dinner in the evening, began to regret General's suggestion.

"Miss Mary," said Susan, "I am a little growing a little more comfortable in the blessin' of our home—a home is different. We might all of us be like that if we lived for thirty years our home comfort, because deafness is so homesome."

"But it is not always so; not even often, Susan."

"When I looked at her this mornin' in her des'late room," Susan went on, "and knew she 'adn't broke her fast all day, and 'adn't sperit to tidy up a bit and make it look like Sunday; and when I saw the gay big parties comin' 'ome from church to their plentiful 'ot dinners, and when I thought, too, of all awaitin'

me at home, I was a'most too 'shamed to give her the look—for surely, I thought, there was a deal better as I ought to tell her I can't, worth more than *meat* that's gone so far in *power* bit she gets

jest starvin' in mind and body as she is, Miss Mary."

"But she hardly ever lets me read to her, Susan; she often tells me to stop. And she refused an almshouse you know."

"Likely enough, miss; but maybe her poor mind is more empty and wrong than we know, and she's but all the more to be pitied for that temper. Cheeriness greatly 'elps us when we're poor."

As they walked quietly together, Hessie's thoughts ran on from Susan's words to the music of the Sunday bells, and softened all her feelings for poor Jemima. There was the home offered to everyone; to herself it had been offered all her life, year after year, and she had turned from it coldly and indifferently, as Jemima had turned from this offered home of hers. So, was she to wonder and blame her, Hester thought, she who knew that a Father's hand had prepared a place for her, which she was making no effort to win, from which she kept so far, in unheeding coldness?

Having a little present for Susan's lame boy, the girls went in with her to her warm, crowded kitchen, where everyone was digesting the wonderful weekly pudding, and where Susan's husband, with a baby on each knee, was smoking what he called "a quiet pipe;" while Hessie curiously wondered—if *this* was a quiet one—what a noisy one could be. He turned to Susan after the greeting, with a queer, almost crying look on his hard brown face. Like Peter Bell, "he had a hardness in his cheek;" but he had not the hardness of eye of that estimable peasant.

"You've done it ag'in, Sue," he began, "and you promised to eat it all."

She laid her hand lightly with a quieting touch upon his arm.

"I'd enough. Trust me for takin' enough."

"I wouldn't trust ye no further nor I could see ye," he answered, a little shakey in his voice. "If you'd take it out fust, I wouldn't mind, Sue. Cut it out of everybody's dinner, and the old girl's welcome to it. But when ye take it from yer own, 'tis a different thing

en—tirely ; and I won't have it, my girl, so long as I'm maister here."

"That'll be a long time," she said, smiling at his manlike rebuke, "and all that time you'll be the very one to want the poor thing to 'ave a bit of somethin' on a Sunday that'll do her instead of all these things that make you and me so 'appy."

Pollie began to talk to Breeze of his two first grandchildren, whom he was nursing.

"Their father gets but little work yet, poor lad," he said, "and Sue would have us take to these a bit ; and very putty little comforts they are in th' 'ouse, too."

Breeze did not intend to represent them as sweetmeats, Hessie fancied, but as small comforts ; yet it required an imagination more lively even than hers to picture any comfort these two damp-faced atoms could bring into that overflowing household.

"He's as fond of 'em, Miss Bruce," said Susan, glancing admiringly at the three, "as if he'd never nursed eleven of 'is own."

"It is curious," murmured Breeze, with

deep reflection, "as we never get tired of 'em the more we have."

When Pollie and Hester left that house they certainly did not feel as if they took the Christmas with them.

No, truly. With its wealth of love—real brotherly love, of pity, of the charity that seeketh not her own, they left it there, in the wee, bright house, where ten hungry people lived on ten shillings a week, and one was lame, and could not stir from his little bed in the corner of the kitchen, and one was an imbecile old man who had come, ten years before, to lodge with them, and had not been able to pay his few pence of weekly rent for four of those years, yet who would live on with them so until, at God's touch, there should be light, and the poor dim spirit should perhaps know all that had been done for it, and be another testimony, even there, to the wisdom of One who hath chosen the poor in this world, rich in faith.

After service Molly and Choosan were called

upon ; then the girls walked slowly and lovingly home along the frosty, quiet streets, thinking it might be a long, long while before they could spend another Sunday happily together as they were spending this one, which was so nearly over.

They entered the bright, warm little drawing room, expecting to find the two old ladies shaking off, with supernatural liveliness, all traces of the forty winks which usually—and especially on a Sunday—visited them in the gloaming, for they had been home from church more than an hour ; but instead of this, they found them in very wide-awakefulness, entertaining Lord Leaholme and Mr. Delahoyde.

“ We are leaving so early in the morning,” said Leaholme, as he shook hands with Pollie, “ that we ventured to disturb you to-day, and Mrs. Goldsmith has invited Delahoyde to tea ; she did not mention me, though.”

Hester was greeting Hugh, and looking into his laughing face. She noticed the change in him. He had lost the worn, desponding

look which had clouded his eyes, and he was, as she afterwards described it to Pollie with a shade of hyperbole, half as broad again at least.

Pollie had by this time merrily arranged the matter of the invitation, and went away to order and superintend the preparations for tea. Hester hesitated, not liking to follow immediately.

"We are late, are we not, Mrs. Goldsmith?" she said, glancing at the time-piece; and, in her new nervousness, not quite knowing what to say.

"We did not expect you before, dear, knowing you were calling on our New Year's guests."

"How was Mrs. Choosan?" asked Leaholme, easily.

"Enjoying pleasant reminiscences of the party, only she says she laughed so much that her eyes *swole*. Mr. Delahoyde, take care. Is it not a warning to you?"

"I recollect remarking, Mrs. Goldsmith,"

said the Earl, meditatively, "that she looked on us at parting with rather a gin-and-watery eye. No wonder that it swole."

"Good gracious, Lord Leaholme," exclaimed practical little Miss Phyllis, "poor old Choosan is the soberest creature in the world; only she takes spirits so seldom that they excite her."

"Oh ! is that it ?" he asked, feigning intense relief.

"Had she any of her usual requests to make ?" asked Mrs. Goldsmith, looking as serious as she could.

"Wants ! oh, no she never mentioned one," replied HESSIE, looking seriously back at her, "but a strange dream has been visiting her. She dreamed that Pollie and I took her a new cloak. Being superstitious, this has taken a great hold upon us all three."

"Very curious," said the Earl, with comical deliberation, as he half sat upon the table looking at her.

She was slightly leaning against the chimney-piece, as pretty and graceful a figure as

eyes could rest upon. Her beautiful hair was all put neatly up to-day below the small black velvet bonnet, which had not a vestige of white or colour about it, and which seemed wonderfully pretty to Hugh and the Earl, contrasted with the lofty fabrics which their eyes had been perpetually encountering during the day. Her cold cheeks were bright with a soft pink flush, and her eyes flashed brilliantly with a strange hope and excitement which no one understood.

"Do your dreams ever come true, Mr. Delahoyde?"

She turned to ask it as she left the room, in a bright, laughing voice. Leaholme, with a smile half sad, half satirical, listened while Hugh told her that they sometimes had done.

"Mine never do," she laughed, as he opened the door for her, and then she ran upstairs.

Throwing her walking things upon the bed, she fell upon her knees for a few silent moments. No words came to her lips, but she rose quite still and calm, no shadow then of

weary disappointment on the bright child-face.

"Mrs. Goldsmith," she said, as she sat at table, stirring her tea very demurely, "we went to see Miss Jemima you know, and you never asked after her."

"Pray, how is she?"

"Not at all well. She is suffering from the Sinking, a most painful complaint from all accounts, for she says it werrits her even to see the mice running past her by the wall."

"Oh! Hessie, do hush," cried Pollie, putting down the tea-pot in despair.

"The door seemed barred when we got there, Miss Robarts," resumed Hessie, with deep gravity, "and we could not force an entrance at first. I was just going to cry, '*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*,' and Pollie was just going to run away, when—with one renewed effort—we pushed a great mat away from inside, and burst involuntarily in on Jemima. Was the mat a successful barricade against Fenians? I inquired. It wasn't put for

that purpose, she told us, but because there was a gap at the bottom of the door; a gap that oughtn't to be there, for she never *had* liked draughts coming straight upon her ankles. Indeed where she sat, her ankles were always between two draughts, and she did *not* like it; though doctors *did* tell you always to keep your feet cold, and your head as hot as possible. Mr. Delahoyde, when you have resumed a befitting gravity, I will trouble you to pass my cup. I want a little more tea, and Miss Goldsmith never asks me. What do you think Choosan's husband told us?"

"Oh, do hush, Hessie," pleaded Pollie, again; "I cannot pour out the tea if you make me laugh so."

"He told us, Mrs. Goldsmith, that his wife sent him in to Miss Kimble's yesterday with some broth, or—as he expressed it—'a few broth;' and he was to tell her Mrs. Choosan was very sorry she could not manage to take it in herself, and 'hot it up' for her. And

that Jemima said to him, the broth would do very well without Mrs. Choosan, for David had said quite true that a dinner of herbs was better than a brawling woman."

"Poor quiet old Choosan, fancy her being a brawling woman!"

"Pollie did so laugh, do you know," continued Hester, seriously.

"And no one else, I presume?" asked Leaholme; the question only an excuse for turning to look into her face.

"Who else would be at all likely to follow so bad an example, my lord?"

"I did not think about the following. I was afraid Miss Goldsmith had the bad example set her."

"Miss Robarts, my narratives have not met with the applause they merited," said Hester, raising her eyebrows comically. "I shall tell no more. Would you, if you were me?"

"No, indeed. And yet I should like to hear more," replied Aunt Phyllis, in great enjoyment.

After tea, before the two old ladies had left the dining-room, Hugh tempted Pollie to the piano to sing a hymn he had heard for the first time in church that day. And then Hester found that she and Lord Leaholme were left sitting together at the fire; his chair drawn very near to hers. Her heart beat painfully; and he read this in her drooping face, but interpreted it wrongly.

The silence must be broken, she thought, or her heart-beats would be heard.

"That is a beautiful hymn," she said, feeling that she had not a grain of sense at command.

"Yes," he answered, not troubling himself to hide his own abstraction.

"Do you play much now?"

The words were no sooner spoken than she regretted the "now;" but it was too late to correct the speech.

"No. None at all."

"Why?"

"I hardly know; but—do you remember what Job said of his organ?"

"No."

"That it was 'turned into the voice of them that weep!'"

"Oh yes, I remember; but—"

"But what?" he asked, gently.

"Job was such a miserable man."

"Just then, you mean. Yes, our miseries, I suppose, ought to sink into nothing beside his. They must have been great indeed," he added, with an odd, sudden laugh, "to have silenced those three self-sufficient discomforters of his for seven days and seven nights. Do you ever picture it?"

"No," said Hessie, softly, "it is too sad a picture."

He laughed again. "You do not care to picture sad scenes when there is no occasion."

"No. I wish I had no sad scenes to look back upon through all my life."

"All my life!" It sounds as if you could look back upon your three score years and ten. You do not 'count time by heart throbs' yet, I hope."

"Yes," she said, looking up quickly, "I

was thinking of that only this morning ; how really and truly ‘ we live in deeds, not years ; in thoughts, not breaths.’ ”

“ Were you ? Why ? ”

“ I suppose because I caught myself looking back regretfully, and looking on unhope-fully.”

“ What did you regret ? ”

“ I regret many things,” she said in a low voice, thinking of her one mistake, “ but particularly of one resolution I made four years ago.”

His face saddened pitifully, for how was he to guess what this could mean, when it was years before he had ever seen her. He looked away again slowly, the one flickering hope dead.

“ I thought that thought in church,” she said simply. “ I am afraid it distracted me from the service.”

“ I wish,” he said gently, “ that you had no sad thoughts to distract you from anything so comforting.”

"Was it comforting?" she asked, absently.

"Delahoyde said so. As for myself, I was — Do you remember 'Barbara?'"

"Yes. I think I do."

"Well, I felt like that to-day.

" 'Amid the words of mercy,
Falling on my soul like balms;
'Mong the gorgeous storms of music,
In the mellow organ calms,
'Mong the upward streaming prayers,
And the rich and solemn psalms,
I stood heedless . . .
My heart was elsewhere
While the organ filled the air,
And the priest with outspread hands
Blessed the people with a prayer.' "

"I wonder why his thoughts were other-where," said Hessie. "Was Barbara dead?"

"There can be hopelessness without death. Can there not, Miss Hester?"

The words seemed quivering on her lips which would have brought the sudden happiness to his face, when Pollie's voice broke in upon them.

"Hessie, would you sing Mr. Delahoyde 'Holiest, breathe an evening blessing?'"

She rose, crushing back the pain at her

heart, and began to sing the hymn, sweetly and purely; while no note out of tune told of the struggle within. But presently the rich, sweet voice began to tremble; the words grew less distinct; and at last they stopped altogether.

"Do you forget it, dear?" asked Pollie, wonderingly.

"No," said HESSIE, without turning her face toward them, "and yet I cannot sing it."

"Are you not well; is anything the matter?" asked Pollie, in loving fear, bending to look into the little white face.

"I think, Pollie," she said, with a quick wonderful effort, a real laugh chasing from her pained face the look of agony which none of them understood, "I think, Pollie, that I am going to be initiated into Miss Jemima's affliction. I begin to think I have the Sinking."

Before the laugh had died away, the guests began to say good-night; and Hester stood listening while Lord Leaholme begged Mrs. Goldsmith to go and see him at Leaholme

Castle when he returned. Might he send a carriage over for the three ladies, he asked, as it did nothing but literally rust to death. Mrs. Goldsmith thanked him quietly, as she shook hands, but thanked him heartily, for she knew this was no artificial invitation, to be conveniently forgotten, but one which he earnestly wished them to accept.

Anne opened the door, letting in a bitter gust of the raw night wind.

"Oh! dear, dear," shuddered Aunt Phyllis, "what a night this is to be out in."

"'All aloud the wind doth blow,' indeed," laughed Hugh, going back to shake hands with Pollie in suspicious forgetfulness.

"How un usually red and raw poor Marian's nose would have been to-night!" laughed Leaholme too, pulling up the collar of his fur-lined coat. "Delahoyde, what do you mean by bringing us both into Shakespeare on a Sunday night? Good-bye, Miss Bruce."

She was the last to whom he gave his hand, and she hardly felt Hugh's afterwards.

"You look very tired, dear," said Pollie,

putting her arms round the slight figure still near the door. "Come in now. You shall do nothing more to-day but sit in that easy-chair."

No! What was there more to do to-day? Let it drift away and lie forgotten, like those other happy, hopeless days which had brought her all this misery. Let it be buried quickly now, that it might not shadow her future, and embitter more the bitter past.

Suddenly, with a quick pain, Hester roused herself, for Aunt Phyllis was reading aloud from the new book which had been Pollie's Christmas-box to her; and the words stung the poor child reproachfully.

*"The Past and the Future are nothing,
In the face of the stern To-day."*

Hessie sat up on her chair, her tiny hands clasped in her lap.

"Mrs. Goldsmith," she said, with a bright blush, "may I play to you, as you said you liked it?"

For that was the only way poor little

Hester could think of just then, to begin to act upon the lesson, and to win a little smile from the face of the stern To-day.

Quite early on Monday morning Tom appeared in his character of escort for Hester ; and, rather to her surprise, he hastened her away.

"Why did you do it, Tom?" she asked, a little severely, as the train bore them—only too rapidly, she thought—towards Churleigh.

"I really did not hasten you, dear."

"You did ; and they would all have seen it if I had not manœuvred and acted all kinds of things. You need not shorten my time where I have been so happy."

"Have you, HESSIE? Happier than at home? I have missed you so awfully, especially before Sir Randal Platt came."

"Is he at Churleigh?" she asked, her voice very blank.

"Yes ; he came on Saturday, and is going to stay over the ball at Wye Abbey."

"Why? What is he going to do that for?"

"He seemed to wish it awfully, and mother had *carte blanche* to take any guests we had. So he got me to write to Leasholme to ask if he would be welcome."

"And what did Lord Leasholme say to that coolness?"

"He said he hoped I would take any companion I might choose."

"He did not say *friend*, I know," remarked Hessie, hotly.

"No; but why should he not?"

"Because he thinks still too highly of you, Tom, to call Sir Randal Platt your friend."

"Nonsense, dear. Sir Randal is a capital fellow."

"I dare say. I do not know exactly what capital fellows are."

"Well, you can judge of him now that he is staying in the house. I like him a good deal better than I did, Hessie dear."

"I am very, very sorry to hear that."

"But really he makes himself very pleasant, and one cannot help liking him. You wait and see."

"I will, indeed."

"Only if you *do* grow fond of him, I shall not feel quite in the same way. Is there any chance of it?"

She turned to look from the window with a flash of scorn in her eyes, which rather pleased Tom.

"I am *so* glad to have you again, dear, Churleigh is so different without you. I felt as if I were always looking for you."

"Did you, Tom?"

"Yes, always; but I feel all right and happy now."

"Thank you."

There was no scorn in that answer, and it pleased Tom still more.

CHAPTER V.

TWELFTH night—the night anticipated by so many in Herefordshire had arrived; and the little timepiece in Bella Lane's room was striking the half hour after nine, when Bella turned slowly from the glass, hearing Hester enter.

A thorough contrast the two girls were at all times; to-night that contrast seemed stronger than usual as they stood a minute scrutinizing each other unconsciously.

Bella had been regarding a very gay little image two minutes before, and had experienced excessive satisfaction in doing so. The glass was fortunately behind her now, so she could

not see how the prettiness of her little plump figure dwindled beside the brilliant, girlish beauty of her cousin. Yet Bella looked very well to-night, as she had imagined. The light wavy chignon at the top of her head was clasped by a drooping half wreath of scarlet geranium and jasmine; the rich white silk skirt lay on the ground a yard behind her, having an aerial, illusive garment over it like a frilled veil. Over that, a short skirt of scarlet and gold tissue was looped up with sprays of the geranium and jasmine. The body of the dress—a very trifle in point of size—was heavy with trimming of scarlet and white; and Bella's plump little arms and neck were loaded with gold. She looked happy and animated, and her colour had not yet risen unbecomingly. Hester glanced at her in pleased admiration.

"Hester, how do I look?"

"Very pretty," Hester answered, frankly and heartily.

"I think it is a most handsome dress," said Bella, looking down complacently, "and if pa-

pa says it is too gay, as he delights in doing, his vexation will not last above a few minutes. Lord Leaholme admires this sort of dress."

"Does he?"

"Yes; he would call it graceful. He says a lady cannot be more than graceful, within and without."

"No, I suppose she cannot," answered Hessie.

"I feel as if I should enjoy myself so tremendously, Hester. You ought to have rubbed up your dancing a bit. Do you think you can venture without?" asked Bella, giving Hessie her cloak to hold.

"I fancy it will come back to me," said Hester, laughing, "on the wings of the music probably!"

"I suppose you have never been to a regular ball in your life?"

"Never," said Hester, putting Bella's cloak carefully under the hanging flowers, "hardly to even an irregular one."

"You will feel very awkward, I fear."

"Why should I? Do you generally?"

"No; but I am accustomed to them."

"Oh!"

Hester's face was full of fun. She was so glad and bright to-night. So expectant of a happiness which she felt sure was coming!

Bella, turning again, began to take a sudden interest in Hester's appearance.

"Just take off your cloak a minute. Good gracious! Do you mean to say you are going without an atom of colour?"

"Unless my nose is red," said Hessie, turning laughingly for inspection.

"It is very silly; because you are not a girl of seventeen making her first appearance."

"Not at all. I am quite an elderly person; still I would rather wear no colour to-night. But I have not asked your question yet. How do I look?"

"Too white, I think; but don't heed *my* opinion."

The soft flush that mounted to the wistful

face contradicted that opinion as no words could have done, if Hessie had tried words; she merely wondered vaguely why she was so easily subdued by Bella.

"Do you want to look at yourself?" enquired Bella, coldly.

"Yes, of course," she replied, the more readily, seeing that Bella did not expect it.

She met her own reflection merrily, though her eyes grew a little grave as she looked. She saw a glistening white dress, and a beautiful white lily above it; her mother's diamonds flashing purely and restlessly; and a pair of big dark eyes almost as restless at that moment, with all their deep, deep, longing look. And she saw nothing more. Nothing of the perfection of the slight, graceful figure which leant the gleaming dress its charm. Nothing of the wealth of rich brown hair in which the one pure, spotless lily rested. Nothing of the dimpled whiteness of the beautiful neck and arms on which glittered those few precious diamonds kept from her

mother's store. She saw nothing of the "tender grace" and quiet elegance of the face and form which the glass gave back to her; and she turned round with a slight sigh, and put on her cloak again.

"Now, Bella, let us go. Uncle Alf is sure to be waiting. Ah! Wattie, are you come for us?"

"Yes," said the child, looking wonderingly from one to the other, "the carriage is waiting. Oh! you *do* look so—"

"So what?" asked Bella, quickly.

"So grand, don't we?" laughed Hessie, as she stooped impetuously and kissed the quizzical little face. "Don't you feel remarkably shabby, dear, by the side of us?"

Wattie laughed.

"I never saw you look this way before."

"Nor I," answered Hessie, gaily, "and I feel exactly like the little old egg-woman, Wattie—I verily believe that 'this is none of I.' Come."

Bella hastened through the hall into the

carriage, folding her rich skirts around her. Mr. Bruce turned with his eyebrows raised!

"And this is you, is it, HESSIE? Is the dress a triumph?"

"I will tell you in confidence when I come home, uncle."

"Will two hundred pounds pay for it?"

"Give it me, Uncle Alf, and let me try. Oh! do!"

"Silly child. Jump in!"

Mrs. Bruce was last to appear, slow and elegant in blue velvet and abundant lace. Tom and Sir Randal Platt had driven off before in the brougham.

Mrs. Bruce, very talkative and pleasant, began to discuss with Bella who would be at the Abbey; how they would look; and various subjects connected with a ball in anticipation. Neither HESSIE nor her uncle could keep up with them; but for them, too, it was a pleasant, cheerful drive.

Just within the door at Wyke Abbey stood Tom and Sir Randal waiting. Sir Randal

held back with a motive of his own, but failed ; for Tom took his place at once at Hester's side, and common politeness bade Sir Randal advance to Bella. But he did not attempt to hide his dissatisfied frown.

"Hessie, be kind to me to-night," whispered Tom. "Dare I ask for the first dance?"

They were standing in a crowd of fresh arrivals, and she answered carelessly, as she looked about her—

"You must judge for yourself, Tom, whether you dare. If you do, I shall say yes."

He murmured his thanks as they walked through the reception rooms, Hessie feeling herself in a perfectly dazzling dream of flowers, and statues, and beauty, and music.

"How magnificent it is," she said, breathlessly. "What a number of happy people!"

"Plenty of heartaches too, I daresay."

"If you are cynical, Tom, please to go."

"I am not going to spoil your pleasure, Hessie."

"I do not think you could, sir."

"No, I am sure I could not; you look so very happy. But I mean I am not going to think about—things."

"You prefer thinking about people for the time being."

"Plural if you must, singular if you please, Hessie. I shall not have you much to-night, I feel sure, dear," he said, dropping his voice still lower; "but however much you are sought for, you will be gentle to Leaholme in his own house, won't you? You will not defy him, dear, as you always do?"

She laughed a little light laugh; but her hand tightened on his arm.

"Tom, my innocent, kind-hearted cousin, do you suppose that the pleasure of your host to-night could possibly be marred by anything I could do or say?"

"I am sure it could, dear."

"But you can make mistakes sometimes."

"Of course there are plenty of bewitching people here to-night," he said; "but even our

host will have leisure to remark a certain little winning face, I know. Why, Hessie," he went on, still looking down, "actually blushing rosily at that?"

"You say foolish things, which you ought not to say," she answered quickly, as she withdrew her eyes from the figure she had been watching.

"There *is* the host," said Tom, pleased at the unusual reception he imagined his words to have met with. "What a splendid looking fellow he is, Hessie. You dislike him so much yourself that I can afford to praise him, you see."

Sir Randal and Bella were before them at the entrance to the ball-room, and while the Earl stood talking with them Hester saw him turn to a young man who stood near: a handsome, rather weak-looking young man, with faultless light whiskers, an equally faultless black suit, and nothing else in the slightest degree worthy of remark.

"Mr. Hemming, Miss Lane; but I fear you

are too late, Hemming, and that Sir Randal Platt has engaged Miss Lane for this dance."

"No, not for this one," said Bella, rather vexed.

Sir Randal resigned her with a pretence at disappointment, and turned at once to look for Hester. Bella bowed to Mr. Hemming, and they went off together.

The Earl sauntered on, speaking to everyone; when he came up to Tom and Hester they were standing a little apart, waiting for the crowd to advance.

"Miss Bruce, how do you do? You are engaged, I presume, for the opening dance?"

"Yes," replied Hester, giving him her hand.

"I feared so."

"Why?" asked Tom, simply, while her heart beat.

"I was about to ask the favour for a young friend of mine. Perhaps for some future dance he may hope."

"Oh! Hester, Hester," she thought, crush-

ing her flowers in her passionate handling, "you must have been mad to think such a thought as you did when he began to speak, and madder still to tremble so. Even Bella had sense enough to know he could not ask her yet. And for *you* to think so."

"Tom, I am very glad to see you here. I need not say I hope it will be pleasant to you."

Tom smiled down at Hessie for his only answer, and Leaholme's eyes followed his with a moment's contraction of the brows. Then he smiled in satirical amusement.

"I am afraid my friend stands but a poor chance. You will let me know when you begin to tire of each other?"

All the longing of those past months; all the yearning love and humility of Hester's heart, seemed crushed in that one hot moment when she heard his words, and looked up to read his cool, proud face. Her eyes glanced straight into his, with a defiance stronger, prouder than the defiance of old because it had lost its old excuse.

"Thank you, my lord. I shall be sure to tell you when I am tired of Mr. Lane. It is just the kind of thing I naturally should tell you."

Misunderstanding the struggle in her face he answered, with a quietness which exasperated her still more—

"I begin to think I presumed an impossibility. Then, until I hear otherwise, I can—as your host—feel comfortable in the assurance that you are happily occupied."

Hessie went through the quadrille mechanically. When it was over she hardly noticed who begged for the honour and happiness of the next.

So it went on, dance after dance, and all the time her little embossed and perfumed programme lay untouched where she had placed it in the sash of her dress. She would not own, even to herself, why she allowed no one to write upon it.

Partners flocked around her eagerly. The best partners in the room she chose from,

carelessly, almost saucily, but with such an evident indifference, now and then showing such a sudden glimpse of weariness, that they could not feel flattered by her choice though they so eagerly sued for it.

The list of dances was nearly half performed when Tom came up to her, as he had come continually before, and found her at last disengaged.

Sir Randal was entreating for a promenade after their valse, but she moved her hand willingly to Tom's arm.

"I may venture now for a royal favour, may I?" he asked, fondly.

"Yes; and let us walk for a few minutes."

"You must own now that I was right," said Tom, laughingly, as they left the crowd behind them.

"Of course you were, Tom."

"Do you know what I mean?"

"You mean, haven't I always found you a reliable authority on all points?"

"In return for that," said Tom, laughing,

"I shall tell you the remark everybody is making."

"Not everybody making the same remark, I hope? How dull it must be!"

"Not dull to me, for I love the subject of it."

"I love no one subject, Tom. I love many," she answered, in the same absent tone.

"Then you have your wish, dear; for all say you are the queen to-night; all the gentlemen I mean. It is a good thing that Bella has Mr. Hemming's attentions to amuse her, or she would be green and yellow with jealousy."

He broke off with a low whistle as Bella and Mr. Hemming came up.

"Is not this a magnificent ball?" asked Bella, smiling up at Tom in her happy excitement. "Have you seen Lydia, lately?"

"Yes; she is over there, dancing away; and, I say, Bella, where did she get the brush this season? She has it suspended from her chignon; a very fine one. I should never

have fancied Lydia one to be in at the death."

"She looks very nice, to-night," said Hester, pressing Tom's arm reprovingly, "I saw her dancing with Earl Leaholme, and I thought how well she looked."

Bella laughed, a sharp little laugh which brought no spontaneous answering one—as some laughs will.

"Poor dear Lydia! Douglas is always so kind to her. Mr. Hemming, I must introduce you, and you will be kind to her I know. Oh, I am very fond of Lydia, shy and awkward as she is. If you are really fond of a person, you *are* fond of her, whether she is clumsy or not, are not you, Mr. Hemming? Do you think we had better pass on? Hester, you seem determined to make the most of your first ball."

"Bella," her mother was loitering carelessly and gracefully by her, whispering with her fan before her lips. "Dance quietly, my love, you flush so soon."

Tom and Hester had strolled back with Bella, and were at the lower end of the ball-room now in the outer circle of the crowd. Suddenly a light familiar tone struck upon Hester's ear, and made her pulses quicken.

"Yes; I will allow it, if you like."

"Oh! you condescend so far, do you?" a strange voice answered. "At any rate it is a face that haunts one, be it with one beauty or many. Is she niece then to Bruce of Churleigh?"

"Yes."

"And engaged to young Lane, I suppose?"

"She was when she came here to-night—for the first dance."

"Why on earth, Leaholme," was the laughing rejoinder, "do you not seek for a dance yourself with the beauty of the evening?"

"My dear fellow, in my own house I wish everyone to enjoy himself. And that would interfere."

Hester's ear detected nothing artificial in the light, gay voice; detected no pain beneath

the plain, straightforward words; nor their real meaning in his desire to leave her to enjoy herself free from any annoyance from him.

The eager, laughing words of the multitude went on around her, and the music rose and fell upon the flower-perfumed air. Hester remembered Tom's cynicisms. "Plenty of heartaches, I dare say," and thought, was *this* what she had come to learn? this realization of those bitterest, dreariest fancies, which had for a time vanished in the anticipation of *this* night?

He had, indeed, then learned to despise her, if the pleasure of this day would be interfered with for him if he once danced with her.

Ab! me; for the bright dreams of only yesterday; the yesterday which was so hopelessly passed; between which and this night there lay a gulf of moveless certainty now.

"Hessie," asked Tom, rather suddenly, as they reached the high conservatories where she had been just once before, "Hessie, did

it ever strike you that Leaholme was fond of Bella?"

She could not answer just at first, though she tried hard to do so; and Tom looked down surprised.

"What a thoughtful little face for such a scene! Are you tired, dear?"

"No. What did you ask me? Oh! I remember. Yes, it strikes me so to-night—I think. It used to strike me often—long ago."

"I used to think so too; but never shall after to-night. I used to hope it too—not to speak of Bella's own hopes—but I feel sure now that I have been mistaken."

"Why? He was dancing with her a little time ago."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Tom's superior wisdom. "He introduced her, and her only, to young Hemming; and he took care to tell her, in a way anybody could understand—though it sounded flippant—that he was the kindest-hearted millionaire in England, and seeking sadly for a pretty little wife.

He throws—or rather brings—them together most scientifically ; and shows off Bella at her best, as he can when he chooses. Now do you, for a moment, imagine he would do all that if he were in love with her ?”

“ No ; I suppose not.”

“ I don't believe Bella is one of the fretting sort,” resumed Tom ; “ but she certainly has been aiming at Leaholme ; and this will be a blow to her, if his previous indifference has not been. Hemming wanted to be introduced to you, Hensie,” he continued, when she did not answer ; “ but Leaholme coolly declined to see it. Have you danced with his lordship yet ?”

“ No.”

“ He is so different from any of us, you see, that, he has an overous part of his own to play. You excuse him, do not you ?”

“ Yes, I can do that easily. Now, Tom, listen. If you will leave me here among the flowers in quietness while you dance with any partner you may choose to select—who ac-

cepts you—I will promise you the next dance. Will you ?”

“Do you really promise it ?”

“Really.”

“But someone will find you. Platt is safe to.”

“You shall find me, Tom; no one else.”

“Thank you, dear. I will go if you really mean it.”

For long minutes Hessie stood with her back to the glass, though there were luxurious seats around her and books and birds, which would have attracted her irresistibly at other times; and—gazing down the brilliant lines of colours with wide open, yearning eyes—watched and waited.

And amid all the bitter thoughts that crowded the beautiful little head, the bitterest was that she deserved this pain, and that the cruel treatment which she felt she was receiving was only what she ought to expect. That it was only natural for him to treat her so, when she had shown this same scorn to him day after day, week after week, month after

month, while he had been trying in all courtesy and kindness—ay, and in deep, unselfish love—to gild and beautify for her her solitary life.

“Oh, I never deserved it,” the longing heart cried out in its anguish, as she covered her face with her hands, humble and penitent; “but, oh, if he would speak gently to me just once more.”

The distant music floated softly up the leafy avenue, but no one came.

Hester closed her hot, eager eyes, and turned her face to the darkness. Then—some one was coming.

Bella, laughing and talking on Mr. Hemming’s arm.

“Hester, is it you? What a doleful face? Are you doing penance here alone?”

“Yes,” said Hessie, with a sudden, proud unconcern, and without turning.

“Are you to be left till called for, my dear?” enquired Bella, showing off patronisingly.

But Hessie did not care for that.

"Yes," she said, "I am left for a little rest till called for by your brother."

"Mr. Hemming will find Tom, I am sure, if I ask him."

Mr. Hemming eagerly consented.

"Thank you," said Hessie, quietly, "I would rather wait."

And as she said it some one else came up—too late now—walking proud and erect among his flowers, straight to Bella.

"Miss Lane, the present diversion is supper. Hemming, I hope you are not above such sublunary amusements."

"I boast a favoured lot," said Mr. Hemming, laughing, as he turned with Bella, "and do not envy you your duties among the matrons."

As they passed the Earl spoke to Hessie, with a little bow.

"I have left behind me several anxious hearts looking for you, Miss Bruce."

Her poor little lips trembled with the effort she made to smile; but as she glanced into

his calm face, suddenly his own scornful words came back to her, and in a moment she was strangely at her ease.

"I am glad you left the anxious hearts behind you, my lord."

"Yes, you would not have me bring you one, as I well know. Why are you alone?"


"I am waiting for Tom."

"Poor Tom, he is worth waiting for too. Here he is. Lane," he went on, in his easiest tones, "mind you are not called out for this unlawful monopoly."

And while Tom laughed, he turned away and left them.

The rest of that night was like a dream to Hester, whenever she cared, or could bear, to recall it.

She seemed the gayest of all the guests when Tom proudly took her in to supper; and whatever group it was in which she paused *that* seemed the brightest in the room, and when the crowd flocked back into the ball-room she laughed, and danced, and talked, as



if she knew no such thing as disappointment or weariness.

A stately Duchess, with three eligible daughters, tried once or twice to awe her into inanity ; but with her little head thrown back, seeing nothing of the effort, she talked on in her bright, sweet voice gently and merrily, and with a touch of something the listeners could not understand ; a something that was called by many names that night.

Dance after dance went on, and between them all the gentlemen clustered around her, eagerly awaiting the choice of the girl whose whim dispensed with a programme.

She could almost have laughed as she watched their open, harmless rivalry—the open, harmless rivalry, at least, of all but one. This one was Sir Randal Platt. He hovered about her so enthralled that he would dance with no one else, and stood watching her, when he was not beside her, in a perfect trance of admiration, regardless of any astonished eyes that might be upon him. He did not

care now to hide his infatuation ; to him there seemed only one person in all that dazzling crowd. But though her reckless, gay excitement passed with him, as it did with others, simply for youthful, light hearted enjoyment, his looks were neither open nor harmless when she turned with more willingness to others.

The strangest feeling to Hester herself was the impossibility of being surprised at her own strange power. It seemed quite natural to see the little crowd waiting round her. She seemed to know quite well, and to exult in the knowledge, that she could fascinate them at her will. She knew that she was pre-eminently dazzling among the hundreds there, and it was so easy to eclipse them to-night, so natural, so irresistible ! She never thought why this was so, never wondered whether it had been so before. This was a night apart from all her life ; and this girl, whose slightest glance and lightest word were prized most highly, was something too, apart from her own self.

But all the wrong thoughts that rushed through her mind that night were buried under a long, long sorrow and regret before she could recall them without a burning shame.

Her eyes flashed brilliantly at the remarks she could not help but overhear as she passed; and once, when she met suddenly in a mirrored wall, the proud, bright face, with its new expression and the unfamiliar dress, she drew in her breath wonderingly, and asked her partner—

“Who is that?”

It was a joke against her through the night.

The morning was far advanced, and she stood a minute resting against the velvet hangings when Lord Leaholme came up to her, and in a low voice asked her to dance with him.

“*Then*,” she thought, bitterly, “when the ball was over.”

She shook her head carelessly.

“Engaged for this, my lord, and for the next, and for—oh! I don’t know how many deep.”

"Not too deep to fathom, Miss Bruce, if you allow me to look at your programme."

"Impossible, my lord; it is a sealed mystery."

His voice had an angry tremble in it.

"Is it usual for a young lady to decline so unceremoniously?"

"Perhaps not. Is custom arbitrary here?"

"Unfortunately she has not been so to-night; there seems something peculiar in the atmosphere."

"Yes," said Hester, coolly. "I remark an oppression."

"Have you remarked its cause too?"

"No," she answered, looking at him, "merely its effect."

She had noticed the stern, proud mouth, but had looked away too hastily to note the tender questioning in his eyes.

"Shall we dance together—once?"

"Why?" she asked, with the utmost nonchalance.

"The world is looking on, Miss Bruce. Why should I not dance with the—with an old acquaintance?"

"Because, my lord, we are here for enjoyment," she said, echoing his own cruel words; never reading, in his surprised, hurt glance, that he did not recognise them.

"And you think that I, at any rate, on this night ought to endeavour to contribute to that of my guests? How may I contribute to yours—by leaving you?"

He looked eagerly at her as he asked the question, but she only laughed.

"My imagination in her wildest flight cannot grasp the possibility of a minnow dismissing a Triton."

"You do not readily forget things, Miss Bruce."

She answered very quietly, "I remember words; perhaps against my will."

"All you remember from that source must be against your will, as I am well aware," he said, a little sadly. "Will you dance with me? Hundreds of eyes are watching us."

"And I ought to have a fellow feeling with these many minnows. Would it cause con-

fusion in the watery element if I declined your gracious offer?"

"I do not find the element very watery here, Miss Bruce. Come, we will discuss that another time if you like."

"This valse must be nearly over," she said, lazily, "is it?"

"I fancy so, but of course I asked you for the next."

"I will finish this one with you," she went on, coolly. "You ask me at the end of the evening; I accept at the end of the dance. That is but just."

He bit his lip; checking a quick reply, and put his arm around her. They did not speak, but HESSIE felt a strange happy dreaminess steal over her in their silence. And so she danced with him for the first time in her life, and that unexplained shadow lay between them. And the many eyes that looked on saw nothing but the two best dancers in the room, gliding silently on the current of that most capital valse, "Frühlings Lieder."

It had lasted but a very few minutes for them, when the band ceased playing.

"Is this to be all?" he asked, bending his handsome face to hers, with a strange unrest in his eyes.

"Yes, this is all," she answered, half dreamily.

"Hester, what spell is upon me?"

"Do you feel a spell?" she asked, carelessly; burying her nose and lips in her fading bouquet, while she struggled with the longing which was upon her to ask him for his forgiveness as he stood beside her then, as he might never stand again; to ask him just to say he pardoned her; just to speak one word in pity, because he never more could speak one word in love.

"Let me see your programme," he said, quietly. "I should like to put my name there, though our half dance was hardly to be called one at all."

"Do you think not?" she said, raising her head again lightly. "I enjoyed it. You waltz very well."

"What a mockery your words are, Miss Bruce. How cleverly you hate! Yet 'tis a difficult art to study. Does your perfect practice repay you?"

"You have repaid me to-night, a hundred-fold," she answered, slowly.

"I repaid you? Do let me understand you," he entreated, in a low, eager voice.

But she turned away her head, for Tom had come up to claim her.

"I cannot dance any more, Tom," she said;
"I have not sat down all night."

"But you told me it did not fatigue you."

"I would rather not dance again," she said, very softly, the colour rising slowly in her cheeks.

"I asked you for your programme, Miss Bruce," said Leaholme, holding out his hand.

Tom looked surprised to see her give it to him without a word, and smiled, as the Earl gazed astonished at the blank spaces.

"Why is this?"

Hessie could not equivocate. "I did not

care to have them," she answered, quietly, "because I knew I should not afterwards recognise one name from another ; but I had another reason too."

"May I write mine?"

"If you please."

He put his initials, and gave her back the list.

"Now burn it at your pleasure ; Lane, I am going back to my duties," he added, as she replaced it. "I intend to wear my fetters as jocundly as possible."

"Do you wish us to believe you have any?" asked Tom.

He looked at them both a moment, rather oddly.

"I have read," he said, with a dry little laugh, "of a certain something which 'works like madness in the brain.' I always believe what I find in a book."

Before he was out of sight, Hester's eyes had filled with sudden tears, for she knew what he had left unsaid. And through their blind-

ing mist she watched him as he went about among his guests ; just his own self still, she thought, knowing nothing of these burning thoughts which seemed to break her heart to-night whenever she allowed herself to think.

Tom talked on blithely and cheerfully ; more so than she had ever heard him, but at first she hardly noticed it.

“Bella and Hemming are getting on famously,” he laughed ; “I think he could bear an addition of sense and animation without being inconveniently overburdened ; but perhaps, it is all the better for Bella as it is, because he will think as much of her as she does of herself. They were discussing you a little time ago, HESSIE, and it was great fun to hear him put down by Leaholme, especially after Leaholme’s singular kindness to him all night. Bella asked him what he thought of— Oh, you would be so angry if I told you.”

Hessie looked up into Tom’s face with sudden comprehension ; and there all doubt was

at an end. The old fault again; the Christmas resolution broken so soon!—broken for not the first or even second time, only she did not know it!

That it was so now, she saw only too plainly, though his step hardly faltered, and he spoke to those he passed just as the thorough gentleman they thought him.

“Let me tell you, Hessie; you won’t be angry, will you?”

“I do not care in the slightest.”

“She asked him what he thought of her—her—sister-in-law elect! Poor Hemming did not know what to say, wishing to please her, but Leaholme put him down splendidly. Shall I tell you how?”

“No, Tom.”

“Hessie,” he asked slowly, “how can you resist the lion of the room?”

With a hot, sharp sensation in her eyes, Hester spoke nervously, hardly knowing what she said—“Are you the lion of the room, you tawny fellow?”

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CHAPTER VI.

THE ball was over, and those guests who were staying at the Abbey, before separating for the few hours that would intervene before daylight, lingered idly chatting among the broken flowers and torn fragments of finery.

Even in the warm, well-shuttered room they could hear, in the pauses of conversation, the sharp, swift, wind-beaten rain without.

Hester had drawn her uncle a little apart to prevent any one overhearing his joking congratulations, when Lord Leaholme came up to them.

“ We have had a most capital party,” said Mr. Bruce, cheerily, “ I wish you many happy

returns, Leaholme, of such a successful Twelfth-night."

Leaholme shook his head with a laugh. "Thank you, Bruce. At any rate it makes me proud and happy to hear that it has been enjoyed."

Hester, leaning on her uncle's arm with both hands, looked into the Earl's face with her brows knit, and a question came from her involuntarily, almost unconsciously. "Then why do you not *look* proud and happy, my lord?"

"I was trying to remember how another Twelfth-night ended," he said, quietly. "Perhaps the rain put it into my head."

"How was it?"

"A great while ago the world began,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain.
But that's all one, our play is done,
For the rain it raineth every day."

"Misquoted," laughed Mr. Bruce. "The right last line is more suited to you now, Leaholme."

"I do not think it rains every day," said

Hessie, pleasantly. "Surely it is enough for us to believe Uncle Alf's American friend, and own that 'Into each life *some* rain must fall.' "

He smiled at her as he held out his hand for her good night, but before she could say it Sir Randal Platt was at her elbow.

"I do not think the rain is indispensable," he said, with a bland smile, "in such a life, for instance, as your own, Miss Bruce."

"What a heavy, dusty highway lies before me; then," she answered, determined not to let any words of his provoke her.

"Sir Randal will perhaps allow you a few April showers, my dear," said Mr. Bruce.

"A soft, bright, sunny shower," he returned, in a low voice, bending his flushed face to hers. "Nothing else upon your sweet, smooth way, Miss Bruce."

"She is not to know that course, then, that never *does* run smooth!" said her uncle, laughing.

Sir Randal began to answer, but stam-

mered and failed; not because other ears could hear beside hers—such slight considerations as those were all overlooked in his eager desire to win this girl, on whom he had set his heart—if he had such a thing to set—but because her face had grown suddenly so cold and proud, and her parting bow so unmistakable.

On the stairs Tom ran up to her and seized her hand to stop her. “Hessie, dear,” he said, in a low, hurried voice, “I have told Leaholme; and he says I must not think any more about it. He says he guessed, and should have asked me, only he hoped I should tell without. He will arrange it all, he says. You know what I mean?”

“Yes.”

The cold, sad voice and face sobered Tom’s excitement a little.

“Are you not glad for me, dear, to have lost this haunting incubus?”

“Yes. Good-night. You will not sit up longer, Tom?”

"No, dear; but I thought you would be more pleased than this. I am so very, very glad myself."

With a hot, giddy feeling of shame for Tom, all the greater because he did not seem to feel it for himself, she stole into her own room, and, before she rang, knelt long in prayer for him and for herself.

The rain continued through the next morning, so the guests grouped off and played innumerable games with the most cheerful alacrity; games ranging from billiards to battledore; the elder and lazier ones talking, reading, and lounging in the stately rooms until luncheon time, when the weather brightened, and they drove, and rode, and walked in the grounds. Then came the long, late dinner—longer and later than was ever dinner before, it seemed to Hester, on one side of whom Sir Randal had planted himself with admirable diplomacy.

Then came the inevitable variety of after-dinner occupations—a lounging chat, a glimpse

of love-making, a dash of quick flirtation, a few innocent little whites, all thrown away on some bright, particular object, the planting of a grain or two of scandal, which might or might not grow into a tree, in the branches of which would lodge only those birds of the air which carry the matter; a desultory general conversation, a plea for music, with the attendant asking and refusing, delaying and entreating, hesitating and complying, fluttering and complimenting, a touch of Mendelssohn; Claribel's latest ballad, and a florid remembrance of Verdi. All these came in due course; but to these were added to-night gayer, noisier, more Christmas-like amusements; charades of course taking their own particular place.

"What gentleman will choose the first party?" asked Leaholme, who seemed to be everywhere, doing everything, and promoting the enjoyment of every one.

The choice fell to Sir Randal; no one exactly knew how or why; and he chose Hester un-

hesitatingly. He did not seem to care who else composed his party, so that they went out with rather an inefficient staff. Perhaps that was what he intended, as he proposed to take all the prominent parts with Hester, who did not relish the idea at all, and devoted her time behind the scenes in coaching Lydia and the other girls. But when she did act she did it, as it seemed, with her whole heart in the part she played, enjoying it with her old childish freshness of enjoyment.

And she made her impromptu costumes so laughable for herself and so pretty for the others; threw such fun and originality into her impromptu speeches; made such comic piquant repartees, and so cleverly managed that the other girls (not at all against their wills) should take the love passages, and she be reserved for elderly or odd characters; that that, aided by Sir Randal's cool, skilful and professional acting, amused the audience intensely. And when, for the finale, they acted one immortal scene in Pegotty's kitchen, Hester's represen-

tation of Mrs. Gummidge—so ludicrous in its incongruity, and so exquisitely performed—made the lookers-on laugh till they were tired. The few distinct involuntary bursts in the room, so hearty and irrepressible, moved some of the actors, too, to involuntary and only half-hidden laughter, but Mrs. Gummidge never relaxed a muscle of her lone, lorn visage.


Leaholme had laughed and clapped most merrily of all, but he never congratulated Hester on her return. On the contrary, he said threateningly as he passed out in Mr. Hemming's party—

“Your glory shall be extinguished shortly, Miss Bruce, in a greater. Try to bear it as well as you can.”

If he saw the faces in the room while he acted he must have been satisfied at having achieved the greater glory. Hester hid her face, ashamed of her intense, spontaneous laughter, and the fascination she felt to watch his every look.

Was it possibly that the wretched, grey-

bearded, old miser—counting his gold with a greedy smile, puckering up his eyelids as he examined each coin in the light of a flaring tallow candle—could be Lord Leaholme, who had just passed her with those confident, merry words? Ah! was that he, too? that extraordinary female in a gorgeous satin dress, the train of which just escaped the ground; and a little bonnet tied behind where a piece of mechanism was fixed on the curly hair to represent a chignon; and in front of which remarkable bonnet a little veil just reached to the thick, dark moustache? When the gigantic lady sat down, spread her handkerchief upon her knee, and began sipping tea with a relish, and talking witty scandal with another relish, Hester wondered whether that face behind the little veil could be really the same face that had bent above her on the tower on her last visit. Again her eyes were to be astonished. In he came once more, a poor trembling, shivering sportsman—beside whom Mr. Winkle would have looked valiant—a stooping creature with his hat at the back of his shaking head; look-



ing round in apparent fear of seeing a bird, and, when he did see one, flying behind his gamekeeper, and grazing the unfortunate man's heels with the muzzle of his gun. Sir Randal could get no word from Hessie throughout the charade. If he managed to make her hear him, she only turned her head from the stage one moment to ask, "Was not it good?" her eyes full of laughter and attention.

They were not perfect charades by any means, but they were emphatically improvised, and so the prettiness and the comicality of them were both decidedly touching and decidedly laughable.

"Well?" Leaholme said, hesitating a moment beside Hester, after the word had been guessed.

"Well," she repeated, the laughter still in her eyes, "you evidently feel satisfied about the greater glory."

"Yes, you have no idea how easily you have taught me to act."

"Thank you for giving me the credit of



your success," she answered, demurely. "You thought I acted well; else you would not have tried to eclipse me. Am I to give you—in return—credit for that?"

"Not at all," he said, with a laugh. "It comes by nature to women. They practise so much behind the scenes."

"Yes," said Hester, slowly, "and there behind the scenes regret the part they performed so easily before them."

"You have never done that," put in Sir Randal. "You have done nothing that could have been better, and so have no cause for regret."

Hessie laughed rather bitterly, for the Earl had turned to someone else now; and she was very tired of Sir Randal's contracted remarks.

After this the young people began to dance, but through it all Lord Leaholme never came near Hester, but for a passing word when—as she fancied—he could not avoid it.

At last they all tramped off to their rooms, little caring perhaps for the quiet time to


think whether one good or earnest thing had been done, or said, or thought that day.

In the early afternoon of the morrow the guests stood out upon the wide stone steps at the great entrance, while the carriages drew up that were to take them away.

Hester leaned against one of the pillars listening to the merry peal of the Ruyglen bells, and watching Tom as he arranged a little bouquet for his buttonhole, puzzling curiously over the glad, unencumbered face he wore.

She had avoided any quiet talk with him since he had said those few words to her after the ball, fearing he should tell her more of their interview and she should have deeper cause for shame. The change upon his boyish face said enough.

Presently her eyes came back suddenly to the group near her, and her heart gave a quick beat as she met Lord Leaholme's eyes fixed intently on her face. She began to speak, hurriedly and nervously.



"Lord Leaholme, why do you put the bells to ring for our departure?"

"Do they not chime in with your mood, Miss Bruce?"

"I think it is really too bad, do not you, Mr. Hemming?" said Bella, playfully taking up the idea, "too bad to make our going a matter of rejoicing?"

"Indeed it is, Miss Lane, and does not chime in with *my* mood at all," he replied, impressively.

"Delahoyde has been performing a marriage, I suppose, Leaholme," said Mr. Bruce.

"Yes, that is a marriage bell ringing for a very worthy pair. I told them they should have an encouraging peal, for they are marrying on little else. The brides who go from Wye shall go with music in their ears."

"And what about the brides who come to Wye?"

"They shall—Oh! for them the bells shall ring till nightfall, and 'tis the heartiest peal in Herefordshire."

"A rather romantic idea of yours, is it not, my lord?" asked Hemming, with a look for which Hester could have annihilated him. "Does it improve your people?"

"Hemming," answered the Earl, with an amused smile, "no insinuations, if you please. We are a free and enlightened people. Why should you hint of improvement for us?"

"Will posterity trace this to the bells?"

"That depends," said Leasholme, with a little satirical laugh, "on who writes their biography."

"I acknowledge the freedom and enlightenment here," said Mr. Bruce, "and only hope it will extend upon the bells. They are supposed to ring out, or in, a good many things, are they not, Leasholme?"

"Yes," he answered, thoughtfully, "and I would indeed, if I could, 'ring in the nobler modes of life with sweeter manners,'—that is all; as a statesman I respect the laws. Miss Bruce, you are frowning at that. What would you ring in?"

He had not lowered his voice, so she would not. She looked at him with a smile which hid the trembling of her lips.

"I would, I think, 'ring out the hundred wars of old, ring in the thousand years of peace.'"

"A clashing, smashing peal that would be," said Tom, gaily, as they took their places in the two carriages. And then they drove away, listening still to the merry chime.

"Hessie," whispered Tom, as the boys rushed to her in the hall at home, and Sir Randal assisted Mrs. Bruce, "come here a moment."

She followed him until he stopped at her own bedroom door.

"I promised to give this into your own hand, dear, here at home. Don't look so frightened; it is but a note from Leasholme. Take it."

Hessie took it, nearly dropping it from her cold, shaking hand; made some commonplace remark to Tom; turned to the children,

who had followed them, and told them she would come down to them presently; then went into her own room and locked the door, that she might read his words alone.

They were not many, but the agony of that hour was recalled for all her life, at sight of any words which he had written.

“Tom tells me you will want to thank me for the few words I said to him to-night—this morning rather. I am glad that you cannot do it while you are here; I am even glad that you cannot do it now, for I know how painfully it would be against your will.

“While you are reading this, I shall be leaving Wye; only to return when I am man enough to bear such days as this has been. God bless you in the life before you, Hester! If love can make it bright for you, it will be bright. You have thought well, I know, before you made your choice; and, knowing all, have chosen. Your own sweet, unselfish spirit will gild the life for both of you; and

a man who loves as simply, and hopefully, and gratefully as Tom loves, has a heart worth winning.

“Looking back to-night, even with this shadow round me, I can thank God that I have known you. But I cannot trust myself to see you again until I have courage to meet you as his wife in the years to come. Ask him always to call me friend ; ask him always to trust me generously, as he did to-night.

“With what strength and passion I have loved you, Hester, you will never know. You would not let me tell you when I tried ; I am not base enough to tell you now. I cannot cast my unreturned love to these winds which roar around us now ; around you, I trust, undisturbed in your peaceful sleep ;—around me in my loneliness ; so far away from you !—but I have laid it sacredly away, dead to you for evermore ; never to trouble you again as I have seen it trouble you. Dearest you have been to me of all the world ; and if I

let it be so still, it shall not make my life a coward's life. Farewell !”

“As his wife ! As Tom's wife !”

This then he had let Lord Leaholme believe when he told of his own dishonour.

“Oh, false and mean ! Oh, false and mean !”

The words burst from her again and again as she paced the room ; her hands—hot and burning now—clasped tightly.

“Oh, false and mean ! I cannot wait. I must make Tom call back his untruthful words ; and I will show him such scorn and such contempt, that he can never think *that* thought again.”

She sat down before her fire and tried to think quietly and calmly, but started up again in a minute, restlessly pacing backwards and forwards, her head throbbing with sorrow and remorse, as a crowd of bitter remembrances rushed through her brain, to that one miserable cry, “Too late !”

She remembered what Bella had called her

to Mr. Hemming in Lord Leaholme's presence—the words that Tom had dared to repeat to her. They two had taken away the happiness of her life, she cried. Yet, in the midst of this strong passion, the truth was firm within her heart. It had been her own fault from the beginning, and the punishment which she must bear from to-day was one she had justly deserved.

At last her angry strength gave way, and she fell beside her bed in helpless tears; her slight frame shaken by the shivering sobs.

She did not know how long it was after that, when she opened the door to her little cousins and let them sit beside her at the fire and talk to her of her visit until the dressing-bell rang. Then she sent them to Ruth, and began to dress.

Mrs. Bruce—from the head of the dinner-table—told James to send and hasten Miss Bruce or they would have finished dinner before she came.

A few minutes afterwards, Horton—step-

ping softly up to her mistress—whispered that she had found Miss Bruce lying down, and “very odd,” and did not know what to think of her.

When dinner was quite over, Bella left the gentlemen (not one of whom, but in her place, would have gone an hour before), and followed her mother to Hester’s room.

They whispered ; as they looked down on the wide, bright eyes and burning lips ; that she had excited herself too much at the Abbey ball ; they had thought so at the time. It was a great pity that she had gone—so very excitable as she was ! Horton could send Ruth to sit up with her ; Ruth could sleep in the easy-chair, and she was stronger than Horton.

“Get everything needful for the night, Ruth,” said Mrs. Bruce, gently, as the girl came softly in, thankful that she was chosen for this task ; “and if you think it well, call me up at any time.”

And then they went down to tell Sir Randal

that Hester was suffering a little from reaction, having allowed her childish excitement to carry her a little too far at Wye; and so exhausted her strength.

And Sir Randal stood moodily against the chimney-piece, listening hungrily to the short, smooth answers Mr. Bruce received to his many quiet questions and surprise at Hessie "laying herself up." And the little boys never asked to sit up later than usual, but went quietly upstairs at their regular time, and helped each other to undress, "because Ruth was with Hessie; and don't let us make a sound, or Hessie will be sure to send her to us."

And Tom crept upstairs on the very points of his thin dress-boots, and stood outside Hessian's door listening breathlessly, never stirring until—having made Ruth hear—she opened it, and whispered a few words. Then he passed slowly on to his own room; and in the morning, before it was light, he was leaning and listening again outside the closed door.

All through that dreary night, Hester's head tossed restlessly upon the pillows, and she lay moaning that the bells hurt her; then that she could not dance because her heart was broken. With a quick, tremulous cry, she said the organ must be shut—shut quickly, because it was the voice of them that weep; then murmured faintly and sobbingly that the weeping was among the ruins by the lake. At last the piteous, eager words faltered into silence; and then, in low, weak words, she began pleading sadly and brokenly, with Tom.

Ruth drew back from the bedside and sat down out of hearing, trying not to listen to the sad, wandering words; while her own tears blinded her. How thankful she was—kind-hearted little Ruth!—that she had sat up instead of Horton, or one of the housemaids.

In the quiet dawn—just as Ruth looked out upon the grey streak, wondering how soon she could send for a doctor—Hester closed her wide, restless eyes, and lay in silence.

And as she lay so, after long hours, slowly

the past came back to her with its miserable mistakes ; and the future faced her with a bare and barren distinctness of its own.

But as the hours crept slowly by, there followed gentle thoughts, and true, brave resolutions ; and when she remembered the bitter consequences of her one resolution never to forget a wrong that had been done, she lulled her anger and resentment to sleep, and prayed that she might be able to hide it now, and conquer it at last.

CHAPTER VII.

THE faint January sunshine found its way into the morning-room at Churleigh, and kissed the hem of Hester's dress (with the only kiss she had received) when she first came from her own room and sat down alone at the window in its cold embrace, too weak to read, although an open book lay on her lap.

A long, sharp ring at the hall door broke the silence that surrounded her ; and she began wearily to wonder whether the old form of paying and receiving calls (so called) between those who never had loved each other, and never would, would ever be dispensed with, or worn out.

In this languid thought, she heard her own door open, and, feeling sure that Tom had escaped the visitors, she smiled and spoke to him by name.

But a heavier step than Tom's advanced to her side, and a less pleasant face bent down to her as Sir Randal Platt drew up a chair beside her, and spoke in a subdued, soft tone.

"I feel, when I see the paleness of your face, Miss Bruce, that it is almost cruel in me to have found my way here; but I am leaving Churleigh this afternoon. No need to tell you why I have stayed to the limit of my time. You must have known from the first what was my attraction here, and why I could not leave while you were ill."

"It would be ungracious then to suppose that you are glad I am well again," she answered, trembling a little, in spite of her calm voice.

"Let me put down this heavy book," he said, in the same low, plausible, gentle tone. "What a heavy one for an invalid to choose, is it not?"

"Yes," she answered, letting him take the great volume of "Don Quixote" from her knee; "but I wanted pictures; and pictures too fanciful to remind me of natural, living ones."

"I see," he replied, resuming his seat, "you wanted, if possible, not even to think, and it is unkind in me to break upon that desired rest."

"Who is in the drawing-room, Sir Randal?" she asked, dreading what he should say.

"Mrs. and Miss Berkeley. I am going to drive home with them after lunch, and from there I go on to London, unless—unless you allow me to return here to-morrow to speak to Mr. Bruce."

"I allow you to return, Sir Randal?" she questioned. "I am neither your host nor hostess here."

"Nevertheless, it is only for your permission that I wait, because—I love you, Miss Hester."

"I feared so," she said, simply, "and I tried

to show you how useless and—unwise it was.”

“How could I help myself?” he exclaimed hotly. “Listen to me a moment. You have gained such power over me—”

“Please don’t speak of this,” she pleaded, the young face white and earnest. “I can but say one word to it all, and you know what that one word is.”

“I have learnt to love you,” he continued, with bitter steadiness, “more than any one or anything in earth or heaven, and you must listen to me.”

But she hardly heard a word. Her head swam as (his assumed gentleness all vanishing in his eagerness) he poured out a passionate declaration of his love for her, the first and only love which he had ever known, he said, or ever cared to know; a love which had been strong and fierce within him ever since he had seen her first; a love such as no other man on earth could offer her. Sir Randal always took care to particularly mention when he

meant to allude to things or people on earth, as if much of his intercourse would naturally be held in heaven—or elsewhere.

. Hester's face grew paler and paler at his last words, and her eyes drooped wearily under his steadfast and impassioned gaze.

"I cannot listen to this," she cried, "I cannot."

He had risen then, and was standing opposite her, looking down with keen, glittering eyes.

"Why can you not listen? Why may I not tell you of my love as any other man would?"

"And why may I not answer as I choose, as any other woman would, Sir Randal?" she asked, with quick fearlessness.

His frown gathered ominously, but he pleaded still; never silenced by her low, firm negative, never silenced even when she rose and attempted to leave the room.

"I cannot take your answer," he said, almost savagely seizing the little trembling

hand that leaned for support upon the table and holding it between his own. "I must try again, for—Hester, you are dearer to me than my own life."

"I shall never answer you again, Sir Randal," said Hester, with emphatic slowness. "I will never let you speak to me alone again."

"What is your answer, then?" he asked, his voice hoarse in his anger.

"That I never could return your love," she said, as gently as she could, "even if you told me of it every day. And that I am very sorry you have given it me at all."

"And you reject me?"

"Yes."

"You will repent it—you *must*—for I cannot forget this, nor will I lightly bear to lose my love, my beauty. Think once more before you send me away. Who could ever love you better than I do, Hester?"

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it again and again, while hot tears trembled on her eye-lids.

"You know that I am weak and alone, or you would not dare this," she said, her eyes flashing.

"Give me another answer, then," he whispered, his face flushing crimson. "Tell me only to wait."

"There is only one answer I can give, as I have told you."

"Is there someone else in my way?" he asked, forgetting himself in his eagerness.

"I do not quite understand you," she answered, quietly.

"Have you given all your love away, Hester?"

"If ever I do that," she answered, with quivering lips, and proud, sad tone, "it will be to a gentleman. That is negative enough for you, Sir Randal."

In spite of the frail form and white face, and the eyes that were feverish in their anger, she looked so strong and beautiful in her youth and purity that he cowered a moment under her gaze. Then with a sudden start he

bent his head, left one quick, burning kiss upon the small, scornful lips; and went hastily from the room.

Hessie crept upstairs when he was gone, and washed her face energetically, but did not go in to luncheon, and Bella wondered aloud at intervals throughout the evening why Sir Randal Platt had not thought it worth while to go just into the next room to say good-bye to Hester, when people had pretended to see so much devotion in his conduct at the ball.

But Hessie did not mind then, for the little boys were come home from their ride, and in their joy at having her down stairs again she had pleasure enough.

So Sir Randal was gone, and there were other good-byes to follow. The time was come for Alfie and Wattie to go to school, and this was a very sad parting to Hester, who knew, too, that the time was drawing near for Tom to go abroad, as his step-father had long promised he should do.

But before that—it was, indeed, as it amused Hessie to find, on St. Valentine's morning—she received a letter from Polly Goldsmith ; a letter different from Pollie's usually simple and loving ones ; a long, vague letter, in which she minutely described a visit Mr. Delahoyde had paid her after Hester left ; and then—far from minutely—touched upon the contents of a little letter he had sent her since ; mysteriously hinted at undeserved happiness, and, with many interruptions and much rambling, told Hester how good he was, and how unworthy she herself. In short—though Polly had decidedly expressed it in long—Hugh had asked her to be his wife, and she had consented with happy gladness. And Hester laid her little hands upon the letter, and looked out with misty, thankful eyes.

Other letters, following this, told her “ It ” was to be in the Spring ; and would Hester—in her love and kindness—come for It, and be her only guest and bridesmaid, and so make her happiness perfect ? And Hester determined

to do so; be It when it would; and obtained her uncle's consent immediately, not much heeding Bella's sneering remark that "It was provoking enough to have a clergyman who was a nobody himself, without his finishing up by marrying a governess, and expecting her to be received." Bella did not particularize what Hugh "finished up" by his marriage; nor whether his wild expectation was that his bride should be "received" by Miss Lane.

"I shall not call if I have my way," she muttered,—which threat, even if carried out, would not, Hester thought, greatly mar the little bride's happiness. "*You* may do it all. It is just on a par with your usual ridiculous notions of standing godmother to dirty cottage babies."

Hester tried to avoid the subject after this, but Bella seemed to enjoy snapping it out on every convenient, and many an inconvenient, opportunity, and Hester could only try all the harder not to grow fretful, or solitary and reserved, as she felt sadly inclined to do. How

earnestly she strove and prayed against it, her own heart only knew ; how she succeeded was proved by Mr. Bruce's speech, nearly a year afterwards.

"Guess? how could I guess it, when she was always the veriest sunbeam that ever gladdened a man's home?"

The last good-bye came on a grey, chill. February morning, such as makes a parting doubly drear. The carriage was at the door, and a group had gathered in the hall waiting for Tom to come down. Hessie, running up to tell him so, met him at the school-room door, His handsome young face saddened at the sight of her, and he drew her into the empty room.

"Hessie," he said, brokenly, "let us part here, before we join the others downstairs. Oh! this is horribly hard."

"Why, Tom," she cried, with an echo of her old laugh, "who would imagine you were starting for a tour of amusement, and were going to do such wonderful—?"

But she too broke down as their eyes met ; for she was anxious for him in her very heart. And she knew too that her own dull and hopeless life would grow more gloomy when he was gone.

" Good-bye," she said, a world of tenderness in her eyes. " Good-bye, dear Tom."

" Good-bye, my dear, dear Hessie," he whispered, struggling with himself. " Only a few months for the French polish and German gilding to do their work, and then home to begin life in earnest. What is to be for me, my love ?"

" The life of a man who keeps all the brave resolutions he made when he left college, Tom."

" But the life of a man—however resolution-keeping—is very gloomy by itself."

" I think the life of a man—who is worthy to be called a man—can never be kept to himself."

" You always turn away that subject, Hessie."

" Because, you see, we are cousins, Tom,

and I should not like to drop the pleasant relationship."

"But if—in dropping it—"

"Do not think of dropping it, Tom," she interrupted, hastily, "It does us both good, and there is nothing else which can ever take its place."

"I know you look upon me as a boy, Hessie," he said, sadly, "and now, I fear, as an unsteady one; but you shall see what firmness I have to wait and hope."

"Ah! Tom, you need all your firmness—and the help of a higher strength too—for something else."

"I know, dear; to resist, you mean. I will do that, too; and I will tell you when we meet what was the hope that took me safely through temptation."

"There is only one Hope which can do that, dear Tom," she said, softly.

"All right. But the other hope would do it, you will see. Dear, shall you miss me?"

"Very, very much."

"But you missed the children quite as much

when they went to school?" he asked, wistfully.

"Yes, I think so. Churleigh has lost most of its brightness now."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you fretting, dear, about anything?"

She laughed, and that was negative enough for him.

"Do not take to heart Bella's coldness," he said, tenderly, "she is only spiting everybody for Leaholme's absence. She cannot understand it, and vents her disappointed ambition on all of us on you especially. As for the mother, she can't help her nature. Don't mind her indifference. Be independent of it, dear. She too is suffering from Bella's complaint, and we all know that hope deferred maketh the disposition sour. It will all wear off under Hemming's consolations. And, Hessie, dear, though he doesn't show it very publicly, the governor loves you a *slight* degree better than Bella; especially now she is so disagreeable. Dear me, what is to keep

Leaholme here at her pleasure? A nice occupation for him, smoothing her ruffled feathers."

"Perhaps you will meet with him abroad," Hester said, slowly, as if the words were an effort.

"Possible, but not at all probable, dear; he knows the old route too well to be wandering upon it now; he is not very fond of beaten tracks. I only hope I may, but I do not expect it. Good-bye, once more; think of me sometimes."

"I shall be nearly always following you in my thoughts, Tom."

"Let me have one long look into the beautiful face I love. Hessie, will you—will you kiss me?"

She raised her head and kissed him quietly; with a kiss which an older man would have felt as a death-blow to such a hope as Tom was nourishing.

"Dear Cousin Tom, good-bye."

He held her in his arms a few moments

without speaking; then went away with his frank blue eyes full of tears.

The Spring came on apace. Mr. Hemming—staying in the neighbourhood again—resumed his attentions to Bella, and made daily visits to Churleigh. Bella grew gayer again, more exacting, and less fretful though; while, day by day, there grew upon Hester a tired, listless feeling, which she could not shake off, and of which she was pitifully ashamed; thinking it must surely be her own fault that it had gained this mastery over her. She tried to be out as much as possible; but she gradually had to own to herself that she could not walk as she had used to do, and had to rest very often, even in a stroll in the park.

The trees round Churleigh were growing faintly, brightly green, as the leaves burst from their buds; the air was laden with the fresh glad scents and sounds of early Spring; and everything looked pure and spotless fresh from its Maker's hand once more.

Hester—travelling by herself to Birmingham, to be Pollie's bridesmaid—looked out upon the sunny meadows, as the train rolled over them like a shadow, with her busy little head very full of thoughts. All forward thoughts to-day; of happiness that was coming to others. No backward thought should be allowed to interfere with this visit. Was not there much to rejoice over for Pollie?—the certainty of her joy; the full assurance of Hugh's. Was not there the glad prospect of having this dear old friend near to her through the—the years to come? No need to stifle thoughts like these; and Hessie let them travel with her, until the engine panted into the busy station; and nervous, happy, little Pollie; who had been pacing the platform ever since the train had leisurely crawled out of Wolverhampton Station forty minutes before, rushed towards the radiant little face that nodded to her from the carriage window.

“Never mind the luggage,” said Hessie, laughing and enjoying Pollie's new embar-

rassment. "It is only a bridesmaid's costume, and the wedding—I beg your pardon, I mean the ceremony you call 'It'—can be delayed, if my box is lost."

There was a wonderful greeting awaiting Hessie when they reached home; and she was welcomed, she said, with her old sweet laugh, "just like an old inhabitant, or a prodigal daughter;" yet Pollie was not the only one who glanced often and anxiously into the pale, small face, as if it had something in it that was new and sad.

That night there was a grand private exhibition of Lord Leaholme's letter and present to Pollie and Hugh, which had been sent to Hugh before the Earl left England, to be delivered afterwards. Such a present! 'It seemed to take Pollie's breath away every time she displayed it;—a ceremony which had been performed almost hourly since its arrival.

"All silver, Hessie," she exclaimed, forestalling Hessie's own discoveries, "and isn't it chaste? and all engraved! and shouldn't you

think it is plate enough for a grand house—almost for Leaholme Castle, shouldn't you think?"

Hester smiled as she took up each thing separately, and admired it to Pollie's heart's content; but as she put them down, with a tender lingering touch, she thought, in her own uncalculating little mind, that the generous, thoughtful letter which came with them, was worth them all. But then she was not going into housekeeping.

"Hessie," began Pollie, with odd suddenness, "where is he now?"

"I have never heard," replied Hessie, simply.

"But oh! Hester, you surely, surely know where he is gone."

"No," she said, shaking her head slowly, as, with wide, sad eyes, she tried to read Pollie's face.

"And have you never seen him since the ball?"

"Never."

"I have," Pollie whispered, very gently,

laying her hand on the one of Hester's which still held his letter. "And last time I saw him, Hessie, I found him in Jemima Kimble's little room; and she was talking to him more pleasantly than I ever heard her talk to any-one before. And he sat there with her like an old friend, without a shade of strangeness or stiffness in the visit; but I don't believe there could be that in *his* visits. And Jemima has kind, thoughtful presents too now—just as I have had. Oh, Hessie, was not that a good way to see him for the last time?"

"Hush, Pollie," whispered Hester, starting involuntarily, "do not talk of last times."

Two happy, quiet days they all spent together in the old house; and there was no sadness in the mother's loving heart, although her only daughter was leaving her so soon. There was no cloud of self upon this time. Each one was cheerful for the other's sake, and thoughtful only for the other's happiness; so that even that long, long talk on the last night of all was more happy than sorrowful.

“A pretty quiet, little wedding,” pronounced the few stragglers who were there to see the dresses (which, of course, are the only features worth remarking in a wedding), and who saw a great deal too; but only *happened* perhaps to hear the low answers whispered and lost in the high, cold church; “very pretty indeed.”

And so it was; though Mr. Ferriman, who was Hugh's best man, noticed that once, as she listened to Pollie's earnest whisper, the bridesmaid unconsciously clasped her hands together, and a still, white look crept over her bright face.

But no one else saw her struggle with this weakness; and through the elongated breakfast, where no one could manage to eat anything even to keep the hearty old clergyman in countenance, she was the gayest and most helpful of them all.

Then came a fluttering, hysterical, congratulatory, weeping scene between Pollie and Aunt Phyllis; a tearful, gasping, embracing

one which included the mother; and Hester detained Hugh at the hall window to allow Pollie still one more last kiss, and still one more last word; and more last kisses again, and more last words.

"Years and years ago, when old Baxter died, Mr. Delahoyde," she said, gravely, "the 'Saints' Rest' man, you know, some one published his last words. They sold so well that it seemed a pity to lose a good opportunity, so presently appeared a new work—'More last words of Richard Baxter.' I am forcibly reminded of it to-day. Are you?"

He laughed heartily.

"You speak as if it were a fact beyond dispute; even within your own knowledge, Miss Bruce."

"I forget who told me; but, of course, it is beyond dispute. I fear you are inclined to be sceptical. I must warn your parishioners of the fact when I resign my further interference in the parish."

"When you do," laughed Hugh.

"Of course I shall," she said, never glancing in Pollie's direction, "to my pastor's wife."

"I would not answer for what will happen if you do, Miss Bruce," he answered. "There is no one else so welcomed. The schoolmaster's old mother is not the only one who likes to sit where she can see 'the young lady coming from Churleigh.'"

"That is Miss Lane," put in Hester, seriously

"Once I pretended I thought so," said Hugh, with a merry sparkle in his happy eyes, "but she set my mind at rest with the utmost precipitation. 'Bless yer heart, sir, do ye think I'm meaning *that* little ribbintin' thing?'"

"And doesn't the name just suit her?" laughed Pollie, joining them at last. But Hessie did not answer, and Hugh, trying to look apologetic, said he had not meant to tell her, only that she had presumed an impossibility.

"Now, dear," cried Aunt Phyllis, nervously, "the train will be gone." But Pollie's sobbing, clinging kiss had to be given to her little bridesmaid. Then Hugh handed his wife into the hired carriage that had been kept waiting so long; put under her especial care, at her especial request, the beautiful silver-mounted dressing-case which had been Hester's gift; then followed himself.

A slipper sped after the carriage; a head popped out for a minute, even in the public street; a white figure on the doorstep nodded to it, staying to watch the carriage till it passed out of sight.

Then the street was an everyday street again, and the home had a sad void in it, which was to grow greater and sadder when Hester went away, and left the two old ladies to keep on the little house alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THROUGH the Summer Tom's letters arrived pretty regularly. Loving, pleasant letters they were, but telling very little of himself. Neither his mother nor sister seemed to notice this. They liked, they said, to see how he remembered everyone and everything at home; how unselfishly he wrote, and what pretty, slight descriptions of foreign life he sent them. Hester longed and craved for something more than this. These letters told nothing of the life he himself was leading; of the way he spent his time, of the carrying out of the earnest purpose of the Winter. And the summer was passing, and the year would

soon be over, she thought, as she sat reading one of these letters on the terrace steps in the September twilight; the year which she felt must be the turning point in Tom's life. She put his letter away with a little sigh, and took out one from her little cousins. So often they wrote to her; so fully and frankly; telling their troubles; telling their pleasures; and asking her help or her sympathy in everything. And always so glad they were of her kind, funny letters, and the laughable little drawings she enclosed! She would not think about anything else, she said; yet her heart was heavy as she slowly rose at last. Mr. Hemming was dining at Churleigh that evening, and it was as much to escape him as to enjoy the twilight rest that she had left the drawing-room alone.

Bella was making tea when she entered, and she gave Hessie her uncle's cup to hand to him. He looked rather searchingly into her face as he took it, thoughtfully stroking her white cheek instead of thanking her.

"Where is Mr. Lane now?" Mr. Hemming was asking.

"We are never sure," Mrs. Bruce answered, laughing; "he is a regular Will-o'-the-Wisp."

"Enjoying himself somewhere, I'm sure."

"Yes; I wish we were all with him," said Bella, from the tea-table. "We haven't been anywhere to speak of this Summer."

"Should you like to go abroad?" asked Mr. Bruce, quizzically.

"Oh! I should love it," exclaimed Bella.

"Should you all like it?"

"I shall not make myself small for nothing, Alfred," said his wife, languidly.

"You shall go if you like."

"Oh! papa, do you really, really mean it?"

"Of course you are joking, Alf."

"Not at all."

"How could we go?"

"You need not question of the 'how,' because I shall take you."

"Will you? Can you?"

"I will—for I can."

"Thank you, dear papa. Oh! it will be beautiful!"

"Hessie, you say nothing; are you not glad?"


"I think I am too glad to say it, uncle."

"That is right. Now remember that it is a settled thing. Let me see. Can you be ready in a week?"

"Oh! yes."

So it was decided in those few words; but Hessie knew, by the stammering hints Mr. Hemming let fall as he stood talking of this trip, that in the end he would join them too.

Mrs. Bruce seemed to read this fact in her tea-cup as she looked into it for rather a long time, placidly stirring its contents. When the time for his departure came, he managed to propose it boldly. Mrs. Bruce—taken by surprise—thought that indeed it would be very pleasant—if he did not think it would be a tie upon him. Bella blushed and smiled, resolving to do all she could to tighten and strengthen the tie it was to be upon him.



He thanked them both—Bella most profusely—and went away in high spirits.

Mr. Bruce did not think he was necessary in the discussion which began then so excitedly; so took his cigar out upon the terrace, while they all sat and talked of what they should see, and who.

"I think," said Mrs. Bruce, at last, lying back in her chair, "that Mr. Hemming will soon speak to you more seriously, Bella dear. You should make up your mind what to say in such a case."

"I shall put him off for a time," answered Bella.

Her mother, looking in the opposite direction, spoke again to her, gently—

"In some respects this would be as good a match for you as the other; not, of course, in point of rank, but in some other points. Edward Hemming is almost as rich as Earl Leaholme, and much more—more easy and adaptable in temper. Even I, myself, am sometimes a little startled by Lord Leaholme, he goes so far into things."

Mrs. Bruce did not explain what she meant by this ; but the girls seemed each satisfied with her own definition of that somewhat vague criticism.

"I think he is so very kind and courteous, mamma ; so do you—you know you do."

"Yes ; but I always fancy it is because he cannot be anything else ; not because he thinks more highly of you than anyone else. It always ought to seem so, you know, when you talk to a gentleman."

"Now, mamma, you have always till lately said—oh ! everything good of him. Now it is just your interest to praise someone else."

"Well," said Mrs. Bruce, submitting quietly to this, "you will be obliged to give Mr. Hemming a definite answer when he asks you."

"Oh ! I hope we shall meet Douglas on the Continent. I am quite hopeful now. And if he proposes to me of course Signor Edouardo must accept his *congé*."

"Oh ! Bella," said Hester, roused at last, "do you care for neither, then ?"

"What has that to do with what I said, pray? I shall marry, of course, and I would slightly rather have someone whom everybody wants, than the recipient of several refusals."

"But, Bella, *that* is not all you think of?"

"No; I think of something else. I think of the unpleasantness of a mother and sister-in-law attached to me, as I must have in the one case."

"And nothing more?"

Hessie asked it almost unconsciously, little expecting the sharp and cutting answer it would bring.

"No, that is all, quite all. I will leave the rest to you. You do the loving part so well yourself; so openly, too. All the world saw how mad you were because Lord Leaholme did not dance with you, or pay you any attention at the Abbey ball, and I am sure he saw it himself, too, only he thinks too highly of our family to remark it. No, I will not take a leaf out of your book, thanks."

Hester rose, her lips tightly set—the pretty,


quivering, red lips so drawn with pain—and prepared for bed.

“Bella, dear,” began her mother pacifically, “you should not speak so. It is unkind and mortifying to Hester, and she will have her turn soon.”

Not trusting herself to say good-night, Hessie went up to her room to battle alone with the old rebellious temper which seemed to peep out often now, try as she would to keep it subdued.

CHAPTER IX.

THE busy week of preparation passed rapidly, and Hester, on the last afternoon, rode over to say good-bye to Pollie. It had been her greatest pleasure all through that sad, sad Summer to go and see Pollie and Hugh. And never, until long afterwards, did they guess what a sorrowful little heart had been seeking sympathy and comfort, while they had greeted the sweet face as the brightest sunbeam that ever looked in upon them. This day she had sat longer than she intended with Anna Moore, having found her little godchild ailing in an unaccountable manner, as children delight in doing without any conceivable pre-



text, so she had only time to draw up her horse for a few minutes at the Rectory gate.

Out to her came Pollie in a little excitement.

"Hugh is dressing, Hessie, or he would not let you ride away in this manner."

"I love, and I ride away," laughed Hessie. "What is he dressing for particularly? and how will he look when the performance is completed?"

"He is going to dine in Hereford," said Pollie, seriously, "and I am very, very sorry."

"Jealous already, Mrs. Delahoyde."

"No; it is a gentleman's party, but some one I cannot bear to have anything to do with will be there."

"Sir Randal Platt, of course. I thought he was abroad."

"He has been all the Summer, and he is going again, I know, because Miss Berkeley is going to Paris in his charge—in *his* charge," repeated Pollie, with unconscious, scornful

emphasis. "Hester, do you know what they say, and what I firmly believe?"

"Yes; lots of things."

"That he is very rich," continued Pollie, too much in earnest to notice Hester's answers, and her face all full of disgust, "with money—won abroad—gambling, and—worse."

"What is worse, Pollie?"

"Oh, you know; dishonest gambling. They say he spends most of his time doing that. Can you wonder that I should dislike his meeting Hugh or me?"

"Or that I should dislike his meeting you or me; eh, Pollie? But, cheer up! What power could a hundred Sir Randals have to hurt your husband? Has Mrs. Goldsmith written since she left you?" she added changing the conversation. "How she and Miss Roberts did enjoy their visit, didn't they?"

"I think they did," said Pollie, with suppressed pride and delight, "and when Aunt Phyllis went home she found the house exactly where it had been; and not even robbed,

much to her surprise, I am sure. Oh! Hessie, I was so proud and happy to have them here," continued the young wife, brightly; "here in my own dear happy home."

"I almost think you appreciate properly your happy home, Pollie dear," said Hester, softly, as she watched her beaming face.

"I am only afraid that I do not feel thankful enough; I, who have done nothing through all my life to deserve it. Think of its being given to me, with such a husband's love?"

Hessie smiled, laying her little hand softly on Pollie's head.

"Let Hugh and others decide that, dear Pollie; and don't you think God is a better judge than we are to whom it is safe to give happiness here?"

Pollie snatched the caressing hand in hers, and looked up fondly.


"Don't speak so, Hessie, darling; it sounds so sad, and I always feel as if only happy thoughts belonged to you. What is in your

words sometimes so—so longing, or so patient?"

"Do I not round my periods properly, I wonder? I will have a look in Enfield when I go home. Mr. Delahoyde," she added, with a laughing little bow to Hugh as he came down the lawn, "this is a new kind of call I am making at your gate. Do you allow your wife to linger hatless in the sun?"

Hugh turned to Pollie then with such a glance of love and tenderness that Hester carried it away in her heart, rejoicing over it on her solitary ride as the brightest smile she could possibly have seen on the face of the stern To-day.

And it was well for the tender heart to carry away that last picture of Hugh and Pollie. As she rode on, there came back to her that sad time when she had sat in the quiet house nursing the dying child; and she recalled lovingly — almost longingly — the patient little face to which the light of happiness had come so suddenly. There came back



to her the gladness she had felt that Hugh had one so true a friend in his grief. And then—thinking of the brother soothed and comforted now, and thinking of the friend who had helped to cheer him and who had been *her* friend once—she remembered a few words that had clung to her ever since she had read them during that first, hopeful, happy visit to Pollie—

“*Earthly loves are deep and tender,
Not eternal and divine.*”

“Not eternal and divine,” she repeated, a strange shadow falling over the upturned face. “No, for if they were, earth would be Heaven itself. Deep and tender is theirs surely,” she added, still repicturing that last glimpse of Hugh and Pollie, confident of their happiness, and rejoicing over it as she walked her horse slowly up the avenue.

In high spirits the little party set out on the morrow ; and of the weeks that followed only a few days stood out clear and sharp in Hester’s memory afterwards. The rest was a time of strange mingled happiness and disap-

pointment, hope and dread. A time full of the intense pleasure she always felt in visiting new and beautiful places ; and the intense pain of hope deferred.

One of these was the day she and her uncle spent alone in the Louvre, while the others were shopping. One was the day of their arrival in Geneva, when they found a torn card of Tom's behind the glass ; and, questioning their landlord, discovered that the fair young Monsieur whose card it was had left there early in the summer, with a Baron Inglese, on their way to Chamouni, he believed.

"You look better, Hessie," said her uncle, as they drove off. "Foreign air has done you good already ; though it seems to me laden with garlic."

To Hester now it seemed laden with hope. Then there came the day of their arrival in Rome, when they found there, unclaimed, the last letters they had sent Tom ; a discovery which clouded the bright anticipations with which they had entered the city.

Then there came one day there when Colonel

Platt found Hessie out, and took her to spend a few hours with his wife. At first she was disappointed to find that this only day she could spend with them was one of their Receptions, but when the time came she found herself enjoying the novel scene, her eyes wandering with artistic delight among the glittering uniforms, rare flowers, and gorgeous dresses. And she listened amused to the un-homelike jargon of the different languages, bringing forth her own German and Italian fearlessly, and laughing merrily over her many blunders.

But presently a darkness came down upon it all. A voice she knew, and remembered with a throb of fear, said within her hearing—

“*Voici, ma tante.* I have brought *mio amico*, as you permitted. Mr. Lane; Mrs. Platt.”

Hester looked up, laughing at Sir Randal's mild failure at French and Italian, but with her eyes full of welcome for Tom.

"Tom, you will come with me in the morning?"

"Where?"

"Home. To Uncle Alf and your mother."


"Thank you, little lady, but I should prefer another direction; I would go anywhere to see you—except where they are."

"Why have you avoided us all this time? Have you been weak and silly *always*, as you are to-night?"

He tried to look hurt and indignant, but failed signally, in his wavering gladness at having her with him.

"Oh! Tom," she cried, all her heart's longing and anxiety written in her face—"Oh! Tom, come with me before it is too late. Stop on the brink of the wretched precipice this life is leading you to. Now, Tom, dear cousin, before it is too late."

She saw his eyes grow moist as she spoke, but she felt they were only shallow sentimental tears, and she covered her eyes with her hand in bitter pain to see them.



He took the hand down with his old gentleness.

"I am rather—rather shaky to-night, Hessie," he said, humbly, "but I am going to change; I am, indeed. I will see the governor presently—when I am myself again. Platt is a dissipated fellow rather, and he leads me on. I was better until he came back again from England a week ago. Never mind, love, I cannot bear to see you look mournful; here, too, where everybody is so gay. I will be a better, steadier fellow. Hessie, I love you so dearly, yet I seem always to make you miserable. What am I to do?"

"Come home, Tom, as you say."

"Yes; indeed I will."

"Thank you. I am so glad, and so will you be."

"After to-morrow I will join you," he said. "You will promise not to tell my father you have seen me until then; and I will promise to come."

"Is this a man's promise, Tom?"

"Indeed it is, dear. I will come to you the morning after to-morrow; and if you have left here, just leave me a line and I will follow at once. If you are only out for the day, you will find me comfortably at home when you return."

"I will depend on you, Tom; but I depended on you once before when you made me the vow that lies in ashes now. Is this to be broken too?"

"No, no; and thank you for trusting me again. How beautiful you look to-night, Hessie, beyond anyone here. It reminds me of the Twelfth-night ball, only you are so pale to-night, and were so happy then. I am always thinking of you, dear."

She smiled faintly.

"You would be better, perhaps, if you thought of better things, Tom."

"I could not do that. How fiercely hot it is here!"

"Go back now, Tom, will you? I am going to my room."

"Ah! there's Platt. Is it to avoid him? because, if so, I'll take him."

"Oh! no," she interrupted, quickly. "Let him stay here; you will go, Tom, won't you?"

"Yes; I don't see what fun there will be when you are gone. Won't you really take my arm?"

She shook her head. Think of leaning on him! So they walked side by side through the brilliant rooms; his slight figure swaying a little in spite of all his efforts, and stopped on the gallery outside the reception-rooms, where Sir Randal joined them eagerly. Hester returned his greeting with quiet, grave politeness.

"Good-night, Tom," she said, softly, before she escaped; "you have made me an earnest promise remember."

And then Sir Randal's detaining words were lost, for she had slipped away.

The guests were, many of them, leaving then; and as Hester walked slowly along the

There came a few lines to her in which Tom apologised for his broken promise, regretted that he could not see her again, assuring her that circumstances were all against it; and—hoping to meet her soon at home—remained, with dear love.

But, stopping there, Hessie tore the paper into a hundred fragments as she stood on the balcony; and the breeze took them slowly and languidly away. If any breath of hers could have blown the memory of the writer with them, away from her for ever, at that moment, as her eyes followed the contemptible words, she would have willingly breathed that breath. She must tell her uncle now; it was her last hope of saving him. He came out to her upon the balcony almost as she thought the thought. Mrs. Bruce had retired, and Bella and Mr Hemming were below in the gardens.

In a few minutes she had told him of having seen Tom. She hardly heard his muttered words, but his face reminded her of her father's on that morning in London when the old grief

had been brought before him again so suddenly. And—remembering all the trouble such a sin as this had caused—she could only cling to him silently, and hide her face.

It was some time before he spoke directly to her, then he only said, "Leave this to me, dear child. Do not fret for him, or this will spoil the benefit of your journey. The roses will never come back at this rate. Now go to bed, and think of nothing sad."

She went at once; leaving him with still that baffled look upon his face; and she felt sure that he would not speak to her again of Tom until he had seen him.

Hessie was bidding her aunt good-night, when Bella came into the room, less sprightly than usual. "Mamma, I've done it at last," she said, with a rush at the words, as she fingered nervously the ribbons on her dress.

"Done what, dear? Oh, I know. I am very glad indeed, my love," her mother said, in a voice of great satisfaction. "I felt sure that you must do it during this tour. I congratulate you, love."

Bella bent over the bed for her mother's kiss, but made but a short ceremony of it, and rose again laughing.

"I suppose, as marriages go, mine will be a very good one. I am but a penniless girl I know, though I *am* well-born. And I expect that, with expensive tastes and desires and no money but a pittance from the charity of my step-father, I should have cut but a sorry figure, eh, mamma?"

"That would never have been while I live," said Mrs. Bruce, almost apologetically, "but of course it is far better for you to marry well now."

"I certainly might have done better in point of family," resumed Bella, in a business-like tone, "but I do not much care." Which was a very philosophical reflection of Miss Lane's, considering the amount of caring she had undergone. "I shall have entirely my own way, and won't I quench the mother and sister-in-law? I shall spare myself no luxury too, you may depend." A dependence which must have consoled her mother greatly.

"I wonder what Douglas will say when he hears of my engagement," went on Bella, complacently, "I hope he will feel his own meanness."

"How?"

"In wanting a rich wife when he has so much himself."

"You are not sure that he does," said her mother, feeling charitably disposed towards everyone just then. "How can you tell, dear?"

"By my common sense. Everyone saw that he was fond of me; Lydia was for ever noticing it. And of course he went away for fear of being tempted to marry a poor girl. He will see now that other rich men are not so mercenary. Hester, what, in the name of fate, is this for?"

Hessie had come round to kiss her; unaccountably drawn to do it in her gentlest and most loving way.

"I must give you my congratulations too, dear Bella," she said, blushing at Bella's surprise, but speaking very earnestly.

"Thanks. Yes, I suppose that is the thing. I do not think it means much though—except of course," she corrected herself, "from you all at home here. I hope the mother and sister-in-law will not try it, I shall feel much inclined to laugh if they innocently make their own downfall a subject of congratulation. Well, I'm going to bed now, my day's work is over; and, as I am in a benevolent mood just now, I will wish you a husband too, Hester, though you will have my drawbacks over again; being very little less of a pauper than I am myself."

* * * * *

Then, at last, there came a bright, soft October morning when Hessie awoke at home; and this summer trip—with all its hope and all its bitter disappointment,—had drifted away into part of that time of which she dared not think.

"The Past and the Future are nothing,
In the face of the stern To-day!"

She leaned from her window; and Alf—

running up to the house—stopped and threw her up a little bunch of roses ; shouting how nice it was to have her home again, and to have a holiday on purpose.

She caught the flowers at the second throw, and told him she had not seen a little boy she loved so well all over the Continent.

And she tried, and tried, in her penitence and her regret, to bring a bright and unselfish smile on that wan face of the stern To-day.

CHAPTER X.

HESTER and her uncle were alone together at Churleigh ; for Mrs. Bruce and Bella had stopped, on their way home, to visit Mrs. Paley in Sussex Square ; and Mr. Hemming had lingered in London too, to be in attendance.

Such a great echoing place the house at Churleigh seemed to Hessie ; and the long hours her uncle spent away were very dreary ones sometimes, despite her efforts to make them busy and cheerful. And, to add to the loneliness, Pollie was away from the Rectory, on a visit to her mother. One afternoon when Hester was returning from her ride, she met in the avenue a hired fly from Ruyglen. There

was so much fear in every one of her anticipations now, that she caught herself standing anxiously to watch it out of sight again. Then she cantered round to the yard, and dismounting there, went in at a side door and ran up the back stairs to change her dress. Then she went softly down the hall stairs, and peeped into the study. Empty ! her uncle's books open on the table as he had left them in the morning ; as they must remain until he returned next day. Into the drawing-room. Empty too ! Into the morning-room. And there, close up to the fire, with his back to her, stood Tom.

She saw him before his eyes turned from the hearth ; she saw the nervous flush on his quiet face ; she saw the trembling of the hand which hung beside him. Then she came softly up close to him, put her two hands on his shoulders, and raised her loving, pitying face to his.

She had forgotten his deceit, forgotten her own disappointment. She only knew that she

saw him at home again—sad and regretful looking, the young face pale and anxious—yet all different, she felt at once.

“Tom, dear Tom,” she said, at last, and could go no further; while his cry of joy broke off in stifled sobs.

Like two very children they cried together, for Hester could not help it, try as she would to be composed.

“Hester,” he said, presently, “may I tell you? I cannot look at you until I have told you all.”

At first she tried to prevent him; but she saw that he really wished it, and she slipped down upon the rug, and, leaning her face against the couch as he sat down upon it, she listened to the low, shamed voice.

“Hester, you ought to turn your face quite away, for I have sunk too low ever to win a kind, dear smile from you again.”

She touched his hand softly without speaking, and he went on a little less hesitatingly.

“I dare not speak to you of the life I have

led this year. I dare only recall it to my own heart with shame and contrition. I never resisted the evil, though I so solemnly promised you I would; never even tried to do so. Was not that alone enough to bring Heaven's justice down upon me? Even on that night I met you and renewed the promise—the earnest promise, as you called it,—the daylight would have found me playing—madly and unsteadily as I have been playing all this time, as I might have been playing now—if I had not been taken away by a stronger will than my own. I hardly know how. Not by force, yet by something which—much as I fought against it—was my only safeguard; taken away by Leaholme. I cannot tell you what he has done for me, for I do not know it myself yet; as I do not know how he did it.

“I am learning it day by day, and I know if I am saved it is through him alone. He has been with me—nearly always with me—coming on the old beaten track of which I knew he was tired; never talking or acting

Mentor for fear of turning me, in my stubbornness, from the lessons he so gently and so firmly taught; always seeming to others just a travelling companion, glad of my society. Ah! think of it! glad of *my* society! Always watching me; helping me; guiding me; going with me into scenes which must have been hateful to his proud refinement; sometimes holding me back in a light, unnoticed manner; at others—when that failed—taking me away—a poor, weak, despicable wretch—that he might save me from greater sin.

“Oh! Hessie, the more I try to tell you, the more I feel the weakness of my words, and the impossibility of showing you what he did for me; and how he taught me at last the blessing of the repentant pain I suffered. God bless him! All my life shall show him my gratitude—with God’s help; for I have proved how weak and fruitless are the vows which I have tried to keep without this help. I try to ask for it in all things now, and—with that help, Hessie—I may begin a better

life. Leaholme has obtained me the appointment which he used to talk of, and it is just the thing my father will like. Too good a one I think, for I ought to have harder work.

"He has let me leave no debts behind me through all this heedless, wild career abroad. Heaven only knows what dishonour would have been upon my name now but for him. When I think of it I can hardly breathe, yet he will not let me feel my obligation when he can help it. The money—if I live and earn it—he will never let me repay ; the kindness and forbearance I never could."

Tom paused, his chest heaving painfully, and laid his hand on Hester's bent head; he could not see her face now at all. When he spoke again it was still more slowly and quietly.

"I long to see my father, Hessie, yet I was thankful to find that you were here alone! I felt I must have your forgiveness first of all; not because I love you so much best, but because I have wronged you most of all.

Harsh, Hessie. I cannot hear you speak to me—as you would speak however I had sinned against you—until you know what I ask you to forgive. Months ago,—I almost forget how, because I was so much surprised,—I discovered a secret of Leaholme's. I discovered who he loved better than his own life; and—knowing the hopelessness of such a love to him; knowing how you disliked him—I was base enough to take every opportunity of boasting of your affection for me;—your love I called it, as you, who know me so well, may guess. Perhaps I really did not know then that there was a real difference; but, if I had, I should have chosen to say it just the same, and to believe it according to my hope. And once—ay, more than once,—when I was mad with wine, I taunted him that he could not win what I had won so easily. Hester, Hester, do not look upon me yet. It was not I, it was the drunken fiend within me. And, Hester, he did not strike me to the ground; but afterwards—when I

was myself again—he begged me, as I loved you, not to give you that bitter grief of loving one you never could esteem. Not even then ; not until a bitter time that followed—remembering all he had done for me—feeling all he was doing for me still,—did the knowledge break upon me of how differently we loved you ; of what he was doing to spare you pain ; of what I had been doing to give you—if you cared for me as I had let him believe—pain enough to break your heart. Hester, could I have wronged you more deeply than I have done ? Speak to me one word, now before I tell you more. One word in compassion. *Tell* me I have wronged you.”

She looked up, a strange deep pity in her eyes.

“You wronged yourself, Tom, being untrue. As for me, if you have ever wronged or harmed me, it is forgiven as freely, earnestly, heartily, as I have been forgiven. *I* to forgive you, Tom,” she cried with a quick, sobbing breath, “ *I* to dare to forgive anyone !”

"My dear, my dear," he whispered, "I ought not to feel so much happier because I have told you this, but I cannot help it."

"Because you can look back upon this wasted year, dear Tom," she said, tenderly, "as a lesson; and on to the better life that is beginning."

"I trust so."

He looked so wearied that she would not let him speak another word yet. He bent his head in his hand, the gentle little smile he gave her brightening his white exhausted face. She sat beside him still and quiet, but the daylight and the firelight both struggled in vain to chase the shadows from her wistful, dreamy eyes.

Presently Tom spoke again, more hurriedly.

"I must tell you the end, HESSIE. I cannot rest until I have done so. Oh! listen in patience, dear, for one more shameful truth—the last and worst. We had not met PLATT for a few days; he had been in England, I believe; when one night he turned up in

Homburg, and persuaded me to go in with him to the Kursaal. Leaholme and I had been there before, and I had seen its devilry *as* devilry. But I knew what Sir Randal meant by going in; and, but that I had no sense nor courage left, I need not have been persuaded. Leaholme tried to keep me back, but in Platt's presence his arguments had no effect on me but to make me feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied with myself afterwards. Well, we played, and played higher than ever that night. Let me hasten over it, in pity to you! Leaholme, smoking on the terrace, or listening to the music, never seemed to stay long away from us. I thought Platt unusually talkative and excited; you can easily guess why I was incapable of seeing more than that. We played, and he lost; lost and lost again; and he laughed over it noisily, and boasted that it was better so than that I should lose, 'poor boy.' His sneer stung me to play deeper—higher I mean—and yet, contrary to what had been for so long,

he still lost. We staked once more. '*Rouge gagne!*' and I had won again. I laughed long and foolishly; yet, though I saw his face so mistily, I shall never forget the cunning smile, the insulting smile, upon it. Oh! Hester, he insulted me cleverly, cuttingly, to goad me on till I should turn upon him too. I knew what it was coming to; I felt that it must come very soon; when Leaholme walked slowly up to us—by chance as I thought. At sight of him Sir Randal's words grew keener and more insolent. This was what he had wanted; this had been his aim for long—a quarrel with Earl Leaholme. Baulked of this, his purpose was best answered by me. He had been drinking through all our play, yet he was perfectly master of himself. If I tried, or even if you ought to hear, I could not tell you what he said to Leaholme. 'The noble English peer,' he said, 'had well trained the poor boy who was in his charge to pocket the receipts for both; and to insult a rival.' I raised my hand right, with his money in it,

but Leaholme held it back firmly with his left; while Platt was taunting him of you. Oh! Hester, that I can bear to tell it! 'Everybody knew why he kept me abroad. His lordship was jealous of the adopted brother. The noble peer,' he hissed, 'was, in fact, but a love-sick, under-hand coward.' Of course Platt knew no man could pass that by. Leaholme, white as death with anger, still holding my wrist, raised his right hand as if he would have struck down the real coward before him, recoiled an instant, then threw his glove in Platt's face with a gesture of the most scornful, cutting contempt.

"This was all Sir Randal had wanted; his eyes burned with exultation as well as rage. I had always known he hated Leaholme, but I never thought of his motive until afterwards. When he had won from me all he could win—won from Leaholme rather, as it was then—he would have a disgraceful story to tell of us; and would come home and tell it to you. You may well shudder, Hessie, but it is true; his whole

pursuit of us, his whole conduct proves it; would have proved it then to me, if I had not been too blindly infatuated to listen to Leaholme, or to see the proof for myself. I might have seen too, but for this blindness, how determined Leaholme was to ward off that quarrel with me, and, if he could do so by no other means, to take it on himself—as he knew Platt would be only too glad to let him;—and so, at any cost, to save me.

“But let me tell of that wicked night. I was so contemptibly helpless and useless that I think I did nothing but sit in Leaholme’s rooms crying like a baby, until he sent me to bed as if I *had* been the baby I behaved like. And he was just the same as usual, I was sobered effectually when we breakfasted together in the morning, but useless and stupid still; and he had to tell me twice over what I should have to do. It was nothing after all, and when I said so, he laughed. He had no messages to give me, he said, but if his adversary proved a good shot I was to unlock his desk, the key

of which he showed me. I knew then that he had been up all night preparing for that. Then we set out together. Oh what a morning it was ! However long I live I can never forget that walk in the silent dawn, with the horrible weight upon my heart and conscience. I think my eyes were almost blinded as I stood with a friend of Sir Randal's who told me what I had to do, for I only saw the two principal figures through a kind of heavy mist. I did nothing ; I could have done nothing there to save my life, because I felt so powerless to save his. I heard my companion talk of a signal ; I heard Sir Randal's sneering reply to something Leaholme had said.

“ ‘Do it, then. Fire where you like, it matters not a jot to me.’ ”

“ Then I heard a shot, clear and sharp ; ringing, as it seemed, through my very head. But the two figures stood there, still and erect as before. The man who stood beside me muttered a few words with a deep-drawn breath—

“‘By Heaven, he fired into the air!’

“Almost before the words had reached me, the report of another shot pierced my ear and brain. I think it was all like a wild, dreadful dream after that. I can remember hurling mad, fierce words at Sir Randal and his friend until they were beyond the reach of my voice; and nothing more except Leaholme’s white, white face, and the blood that was thick upon me as I held him.

“Oh! HESSIE, hush, my darling, my darling. Oh! hush, he was not dead, though we thought he was. There was a clever English physician in that vile place, whom I shall honour in my memory for all my life. And after long, long days and nights of agony, Leaholme knew me again, and slowly, feebly came back to us. This doctor nursed him as I would have loved to do, if I had had the power. Yet, useless as I was, I could not leave him; and, even when he could not speak nor move, I fancied that he liked to see me there beside him. And seeing this, Dr.

Thurtees used to leave us quietly together. Once or twice, Hessie, in his unconsciousness, he spoke to you, and always spoke to you of me.

“Can you bear to hear this? Once when I was kneeling beside his bed, looking for some sign of returning consciousness—looking and longing intently—he touched my head softly with his left hand—the right was the wounded arm and shoulder—and whispered very low—‘Do not grieve, Hester. Can you not feel it best that he has suffered? he will pass through this a better, and a stronger man. It has been a sad year for you, my poor, poor child, but there is no cause for grief now. You loved him then, you know; he is a hundred times worthier of your love to-day.’ At other times he spoke so, too, but I cannot bear to tell you. Oh, my dear, if his goodness to me; if the brave, unselfish things he did to save me—so much the braver and more unselfish because he thought them nothing himself;—if the weak, contemptible return I

made him ; if the hopelessness of that time when I thought I had killed him, or the anguish I witnessed him suffer ; if these did not quite break my hard, unfeeling heart ; to hear from his own unconscious lips how strong and tender was this hopeless love of his quite did it.

“Hester, I used to pray then (as I had never learned to pray before in all my life), that even this blessing should be given him at last. But I felt so unworthy that I knew it would be no wonder if God closed His ears.

“But He spared His servant, dear. Leaholme came home with me ; he is in London now, and will come back to the Abbey soon. Spite of his weakness and his wounded shoulder, he went through much trouble to get me this appointment, as I told you. The Premier seemed very glad, I thought, to do this for him, and so it was soon settled ; and Leaholme was delighted, because, he said, my coming home would be all the pleasanter if my life—an earnest, regular life—were marked

out and awaiting me. He is still under the care of Dr. Thurtees, who came with us from Germany on purpose, and his own man Brandt is quite a nurse.

"There, Hessie, I have told you but weakly of my sin; but more weakly still of Leatholme's goodness. Those months when—wayward and conceited—I sought my own pleasure only, night and day, and he rescued me; bore with me kindly; helped me cheerfully; judged me gently; they must tell their own tale in the years to come. Hester, Hester, my darling, can you ever forgive me?"

He was bending above her with outstretched hands, and she raised her head and laid it on his shoulder; and, while he held it there, her low sobs ceased, and in a broken whisper she asked *him*, too, for pardon.

The fire burned low, and the daylight had all faded; but they did not notice it, in the brightness of a glory that had nothing to do with sun or fire, but was, perhaps, a ray of the joy there was in Heaven among the angels.

CHAPTER XI.

OCTOBER was drawing to its close. The leaves no longer rustled under-foot, but lay in dismal brown heaps in every sheltered corner. The wind passed without a sigh by the bare branches that, a little time before, had bent sweetly and coyly in his embrace. Fires looked cheering and comforting, Hester thought, in the big, empty rooms; bigger and emptier than ever, they seemed to her now, for Tom had gone back to London, professedly to be with his mother and sister, really to be with Leaholme, for if it had not been for him, Tom would have assuredly have stayed with Hester and his step-father,

whose love for the gay and pleasant lad had grown deeper a hundredfold for the earnest, unselfish fellow, whom he was pleased and proud to call his son.

Mr. Bruce had asked Hessie if she would go too, but, less even than usual now, did she feel inclined for a visit to Mrs. Paley, or a share of the gaiety in which Bella seemed to be revelling.

The Abbey was still without its master as the Winter crept on, and Pollie's continued absence from the Rectory made another void for Hessie.

A few days after Hester had left her standing with her husband in the sunshine, Pollie had gone home on a visit, as she had sent Hessie word in a short, vague, little letter, in which she begged, with unwonted earnestness, that Hessie would write to her and tell her of everybody, because Hugh had so many other things to think of. Hester had written—in all her own anxiety and trouble—pleasant, cheery accounts, if not very long.

ones, of everybody; most especially of Hugh himself; whom she saw as often as she could; and who, as she told his little absent wife, seemed "fretting manfully."

But as the October sunshine faded, and the drear November days crept in among the shadows, there reached Hessie a letter with the Aberswys postmark and the few blotted lines said only:—

"Oh! Hessie, darling. Could you come to me for an hour at the old lodgings here? There is no one in all the world whom I can hope or wish to see but you. If you cannot come, or if you feel you ought not, I shall know that you are right. But do not tell anyone, not anyone!—POLLIE."

"Uncle Alf," entreated Hessie, coaxingly, "may I go and spend one day with Mrs. Delahoyde?"

"But she is away. She is with her mother, is not she? Delahoyde told me she went to her mother in September."

"So she did, uncle. May I go to her for a day?"

"Certainly, dear ; to-morrow, if you like, and I will take you over."

"I would rather go to-day, please, uncle Alf."

"But I cannot leave to-day."

"I don't mind being alone," said Hessie, quickly, "I would so like to go to-day."

"Very well, little Miss Obstinate. Take Ruth, then."

"Must I ? Very well, uncle."

Miss Shakespeare had let her rooms at an unhoped for time, and an unequally hoped-for rent ; there was no stair-carpet down, and no dog forthcoming ; so she was less acid than usual when she received Hester, rather astonished at the arrival alone in the dusk of the winter afternoon of the beautiful girl whom she well remembered. For Ruth had been sent to the hotel with instructions to get a private room, a large fire, and everything she wanted, until her young mistress joined her.

The early twilight crept and clung about the stunted elms, as Hessie—looking very much at home—sat beside Pollie's bed, where the sad little mother lay and gathered hope and courage from the bright face that hovered over her and her new-born child.

“If you will lie quite still until I have satisfied myself that baby wonderfully resembles you, or is speakingly like his father; also until I have had some tea and rested, you shall tell me all about everything.”

And Hessie rose and moved about the room in her pretty bright dress exactly as if she had been with mother and child from the first, and was quietly accustomed to it all. She took a long time over her tea, not allowing Pollie to speak the while. And the wished for consequence ensued. As Pollie dreamily and happily watched her, she fell into a soft, deep sleep. Then Hessie sat quite still before the fire, and tried to think out a very puzzling thought.

The nurse peeped into the room and went



away again to tell Miss Shakespeare that this sleep was just what the poor lady had wanted.

The firelight shone clearly and steadily out into the darkness of the street, when Pollie opened her eyes upon the pretty homelike picture of the little watcher at the fire; and, while Hessie softly held the hand upon the coverlet, Pollie told her story.

“I must go back a long way, Hessie,” she said, “but I will make it as short as I can, for it is a silly and a gloomy tale. When I first went to Lorne House, a girl of fifteen, I was not teacher, as you knew me, but a pupil; and in those days I got to be rather a favourite with the other girls, especially with one whom you knew afterwards, Ella Platt. She was an industrious, serious girl, and very kind to me; and when her father was in London and she went for a holiday, she always got leave for me too. Very much we used to enjoy those visits, and perhaps I enjoyed them most of all—for I was only a silly girl

of sixteen then—because we met there a cousin of Ella's, and he was very fond of being with us, and tried how pleasant he could make those times for me. You know him ; you know him now, as you would have known him then, for a heartless, unscrupulous man of the world ; but I was never so clear judging, Hessie, and, though you will wonder how any girl could be induced to admire Sir Randal Platt, I did. I did, indeed ; *only* admire him though, nothing more ! I never had much attention paid me in my life, Hessie ; I never was pretty, as you know, and I never could fascinate, as some girls do without being pretty at all. But at that time, I suppose I had just the prettiness of youth, and he pretended to like me very much. I was little more than sixteen when Ella left school, and I went home with her for those summer holidays. Sir Randal was there all the time, and we were together a good deal ; for though, as I said, Ella was very kind to me and my greatest friend, she was a quiet,

practical girl like myself, Hessie, and never taught me what it was to love her as you taught me to love you, even when you were but a little child.

“When the time came for my return to school, they put me in Sir Randal’s charge, as he said he had to be in London on that day. When we changed trains at Chester, he took our tickets, and we went on very gaily and thoughtlessly together in the express. We were to have been in at Paddington at seven, as I had told Miss Berrington in my letter the night before, and I did not think of noticing the time it passed so merrily. I had but travelled between Chester and London once before, so that the unfamiliarity of the places we passed never struck me. But at last the long summer twilight closed in upon us, and I began to wonder. We were travelling by the longest route, Sir Randal told me when I questioned him. Could I not guess why he had chosen it?

“I am afraid I was a little proud because

I could guess, and went chatting on contentedly. Dashing past the village stations went the express, and at last I was really frightened. We were, as we had been all the journey, alone in the carriage, and when we next stopped, he said, he would get out and make enquiries.

“‘Yes, of course, he had made a blunder,’ he explained, laughing as he came back to the carriage door. ‘Here we were at Carlisle. We must make the best of such a laughable little mistake.’

“Girls were not such travellers then as they are now, Hessie; still, I was silly and ignorant not to have known such a blunder could not have been made by such a man; I felt certain it was a mistake of his. I believed him so implicitly that I was as sorry for him as for myself.

“‘What should we do?’ I cried, and the tears came fast in my eyes.

“He tried to comfort and reassure me, saying, that though it was very ridiculous, and

he deserved excommunication for being so wandering in his actions as well as in his thoughts, it would be all right; and in the meantime the wisest thing would be to make the best of it.

“ So he took me to an hotel, and ordered supper, and we were both hungry and enjoyed it. Over and over again I said I ought to go back at once, even if I travelled all night ; but I suppose I rather dreaded the idea in reality, and my words had no effect.

“ I was too childish and innocent, Hessie, I was, indeed, for even a suspicion of wrong; and I had learned from Ella to look up to Sir Randal as an honourable, truthful English gentleman.

“ So, though it seems horrible to look back upon that evening through which I sat beside him, we were quite cheerful really, and talked and laughed a good deal over our misadventure. It was not until I was alone in my own room that I felt uncomfortable and unhappy, and longed to be back, even at the

very hardest lesson I had ever been put to learn, rather than there. I could not touch my breakfast, and waited eagerly for the carriage which was to take us to the station. All my fears vanished when I was in it, and we drove away gaily. Sir Randal tried harder than ever to make it pleasant and enjoyable, and once more, in the summer sunshine, things seemed bright and harmless.

“We drove along. Ah! Hessie, I see you guess it. We were driving out into the country, and when the horses stopped in a grand old wood, he said, lifting me from the carriage, we had missed the early train, and as we had a few hours of compulsory waiting he thought it would be pleasanter to spend them there than at that gloomy inn.

“I fancied I saw sense in that, and we roamed about happily in the flickering sunshine, and the man who drove us brought us, from the carriage, a dainty little luncheon basket which we unpacked under the drooping trees beside the sweetest little brook, I

thought, in all the world. Hessie, he managed it so that it was evening again when we prepared to leave. I never can tell how he made the time fly, for I hate to recall any of his false words.

“My fears were wide awake now, and I said I would not go back with him, I would go to London alone, night as it would be. Oh! Hessie, dear, I will not tell you how he tempted me to listen to him. You know him, and you can judge. What was the use, he said, of going back to work and punishment, when we might make life so pleasant? Ah! I wish I had forgotten all his cruel, bad words. He pleaded long, there in the beautiful spot which almost pleaded for him too; and then he threatened—threatened exposure and disgrace. *He* to speak to me of disgrace! But I was strong then in my despair; so lonely, so far away from help I seemed that that very knowledge gave me strength. I never since have had the courage I had then—child almost that I was. I think

if the wind does not always seem tempered, God gives the shorn lamb a little extra courage to bear it, does not He ? All through that night I travelled with Sir Randal, closing my ears to every word he uttered, turning from him as I could fancy turning from a reptile. He was not daunted all that time, hardly discouraged, for he never tired of showing me an exaggerated picture of the hardships of school life, and the ease and attraction of the life he offered me.

“Hessie, I shall never forget the moment when the train stopped at Paddington, and I looked out upon Miss Berrington’s face. Was it not wonderful that she was there ? I know perfectly well that Sir Randal had intended to leave me here (if I insisted upon staying) to go back alone with what story I would. But it was too late now. I hardly know what he said to Miss Berrington, or she to him. I could only cling to her crying with all my might, like the tired, stupid, childish girl I was : but I know he wrote her a long letter of

apology and explanation, and I think no one was ever told. Miss Berrington took me back with her, and that was the end of it until that day—Oh! you remember it, Hessie!—when I met him at Aberswys. Ella I have never seen since; she was abroad most of the time until her marriage, and she was not one to cling tenderly to an old friendship like yourself. That is the far-back story, Hessie, now I must end it quickly. You remember the day I last saw you at the Rectory, when Hugh was going to dine in Hereford where he was to meet Sir Randal Platt, who, I knew, was going abroad the next day. He generally is abroad now, and they whisper strange stories of his doings there. What is the matter, dear? are you so tired of my story? I have nearly finished. Oh! how I longed that Hugh should not go; but what reason could I give him? I knew if he heard where Sir Randal had been he would begin to talk of Earl Leaholme, and I—I don't know what I dreaded, except for those two to be together.

Well, he went, Hessie, and it all happened as I had feared. They talked together of Lord Leaholme and Mr. Lane, and Hugh might have known, from what he said of them, that he could lie. But isn't it true that "A lie that is half the truth is ever the blackest of lies?" What he told Hugh was half the truth, yet it was the blackest lie of all. Was it really true what he had heard, that Mr. Delahoyde had married Miss Goldsmith, of Birmingham? He was, indeed, surprised—for he should have judged her a most unsuitable wife for a clergyman, a girl—a girl who—but of course this was in confidence, as the matter had been kindly hushed up and glossed over by a weak, indulgent, old schoolmistress! but—to tell the simple truth, where simple truth was best—a girl who had run away from school to spend a few days with himself at the lakes, and afterwards been taken charitably back by the very old lady whom she had so cleverly duped.

"Hugh was long before he believed this, as I fancied afterwards; but having once ac-

cepted a proof, and let the belief take root, it was rooted for ever.

“He came home very, very late that night, Hessie, and when I turned and met his stern eyes, I knew what he had heard.

“Oh ! why had not I told him myself, before I took his pure, exacting love? I so often meant to—so often tried—as I used to try to tell you, dear, in that Summer when you and Sir Randal were thrown together. But I never could.

“I think I started back from Hugh before he spoke. I think I cowered in my chair when he asked me one cold, cruel question. I know I put up my hands to hide his rigid face. Then, when he repeated the question, without another word, I sobbed that it was partly true ; but—

“He heard no more ; he did not come near me again that night, and in the morning we sat opposite to each other without one word. Oh ! he was so white and sad, yet so cold and cruel, and I was afraid of him.

“I tried to speak once or twice, but he awed

me with his immovable face. Oh! Hessie, may you never know shame and agony like that! It went on day after day, until I wrote to mother that I was coming to see her, and I followed my letter. As I bid Hugh good-bye I asked him if he had no word to say to me. He said, 'No; no word at all.'

"So with a breaking heart I went home, and oh, it *was* hard to prevent their guessing my sorrow. I think I spent my whole nights in tears, and my whole days in trying to keep them back. I used to get up that I might be down first, and when mamma and Aunt Phyllis came into the room I began to tell them something of home and Hugh—little things you told me, Hessie—just to make them think I had had a letter from him, and to prevent the terrible question, 'Another letter to-day, dear?' For of course, no letter ever came from him, though I used to pray so unrestingly, and hope so passionately. At last mother began to fancy I hid my letters because Hugh pleaded in them to have me home again,

and, do you know, Hessie, I was so cowardly that I let that pass. I felt at last that I must fix a time to go, and I did; but I put it off day after day until they wondered at my conduct, as I could see; and I fixed upon my train, determining not to delay again. Oh, Hessie, when Aunt Phyllis proposed writing to Hugh to come the day before I went, to fetch me, I thought I should choke with my unshed tears of shame and fear. Yet I got away quietly, and bade them quite a cheerful good-bye.

“At the first station I left that train and took a ticket here, and Miss Shakespeare took me in; and, after one lonely, miserable night, God sent me the little one who was to have come in the happiness of the coming year. My baby, who was to have come in joy and love; who was to have brought such joy and love to my own two homes. Hessie, how your face pities me, darling! My heart was *so* heavy and sad till you came. What should I have done without you?”

"Just what you must do *with* me, Pollie, just lie still, and nothing more."

The girl's soft voice had a new tone in it, Pollie thought, a tone of infinite tenderness and comfort, but of brave hope too.

"We women have a great deal of lying still in our lives, haven't we, Pollie? And sometimes we find it very hard to do."

"Hugh was always fond of that idea of Keble's," said Pollie, quietly, "waiting to see what God will do! I suppose we ought to like the waiting."

"Yes," answered Hester, gently, "but I think that is hardly *our* idea of waiting, it includes other things, of course. We have no right to fold our hands upon our cross while we say, 'It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good.' We must surely clasp and bear it just the same. But at present, dear," she added, softly kissing Pollie's wan face, "you are emphatically and in every sense to lie still; in the morning I am going home again, and—Pollie—if it seems still sad and gloomy to

you ; if it even seems sadder when I am gone ; be all the more glad, because it is always at the very darkest that light breaks. Good-night, my dear, my dear."

She turned again at the door and went back for another good-bye ; left kiss after kiss on Pollie's lips ; made a funny little allusion to the baby's total incapacity for giving or receiving kisses ; then went away at last, leaving the nurse inexplicably improved in care and attention.

CHAPTER XII.

NEXT day Hester once more sat with her old governess in the familiar room at Lorne House; sat as long as her train would allow her, for the old lady seemed to like to have her there. She had told a little of Pollie's story in her old loving way, and Miss Berrington—her gold spectacles unaccountably dim, and her kind hand rather shaky—had emptied her private letter-drawers, and hunted out the letter Sir Randal Platt had written to her just fourteen years before. With a few words of deep gratitude HESSIE took it, holding it closely in her hand while she stayed.

“It explains everything,” said the old lady

in a glad voice, "and I am very thankful now that I have such a habit of keeping my letters—letters that are not on business, I mean."

That evening Hester and Ruth reached home again, and found Mr. Bruce away. Next morning Hester left word she was going to stay with Mrs. Delahoyde two days, and ordered the pony carriage. If she drove as far as the ruins at Wye, she could send the carriage back and walk through the woods to Rayglen Rectory—the walk would do her good, she felt, and she should love to see the old place again now that it was empty, see it for the last time perhaps.

She took Tom's key of the fishing tower in her pocket, and when she reached the woods, gave the reins to the groom to take the carriage home.

Feeling intensely every sight and sound, she walked on down to the ruins. There was no ripple of the water on the shore; all was still, with a lonely, heavy stillness. Slowly


she put the key into the lock of the little iron-nailed door, opened it, and stood with bent head and clasped hands before the narrow, empty fireplace. She had never entered the room since that first day when he had taken them over it, and told them that he felt such a shuddering dislike to the place. Why? It was but a still and quiet spot after all. She should like to sit here for hours and hours in the solitude if no duty called her away.

What a rest it would be! the poor little tired girl thought, with the weight of pain upon her eyelids. What a rest, if she might stay here for a time alone, undisturbed, unwatched, unspoken to! It would be just the relief she needed.

Ah! little Hester. Do you feel nothing of the damp fog that creeps through the rusty bars and broken windows? nothing of the heavy, mouldy chill of the place? nothing of the hopelessness of the deep, silent loneliness here?

As she stood in the gloom and chill of

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the little room, that one day came back to her vividly. She almost felt Lord Leaholme beside her, laughing as he spoke of the little cloud across the lake. She felt, more strongly than ever, the consciousness which she had never been without, that he loved her—loved her as no one could ever love her again : as she had never deserved to be loved.

“Oh, God ! bless him with happiness, however Thou mayst punish me.”

She clasped her hands above her head as she sobbed the words ; the face which had brightened that spot before in its radiant, girlish beauty, so still and white, and weary, now !

Presently Hester turned, the wild unspoken sorrow of her life surging like a flood upon her brain. The light flickered and threw strange shadows about the little room, but without one thought of fear Hester mounted the narrow staircase and entered the silent chamber.

There lay a driving glove upon the floor

under the window. Damp and mildewed as it was, she took it up and held it to her cheek for a moment—moved it slowly to her lips, and gave it a shy, gentle kiss. As she did so, something fell from it and lay upon her dress. It was the signet ring which the Earl had lost on that day when she had been there before. She picked it up and read the motto with eager, tearful eyes; then laid it gently down upon the glove.

Standing then beside the closely barred window, she looked out across the silent water. Though the chill of the room struck straight to her heart, it was not that which made her shiver so helplessly as she hastily groped her way down the broken stairs again, and left the house with a sudden dread and nameless horror of it.

When she had left it nearly a mile behind, she stopped suddenly in her hurried, nervous walk, and tried to remember whether she had locked the door. No—surely no; for she had no key in her hand, and remembered nothing

but that she had hastened from the tower. She turned, vaguely and dreamily wondering why her head pained her so and would not let her remember.

Yes, there was the key in the door still. It was well that she had recalled herself in time to turn back. With trembling fingers she turned it in the lock, put it into her pocket, and once more started on her way.

But now the water plashed noisily upon the pebbles ; the leaves whirled past her in the woods, and rustled with a sound that seemed to pierce her brain, as she trod among them. The air seemed full of strange, shrill voices, and the ground swayed under her. Clasp ing her head with both hands, powerless to battle any longer with this new nervous pain, she threw herself down among the gaunt, cold trees in the silent wood, and sobbed aloud, as if her heart were breaking.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUGH DELAHOYDE sat alone in his study that evening, stern and proud and miserable; miserable with a softer and more remorseful misery than it had been of late, although he was hardly aware of it—yet a misery that had unconsciously increased tenfold since he had been to the Abbey to welcome Lord Leaholme home. It had shocked Hugh inexpressibly to find him still so weak, his right arm perfectly helpless and his shoulder paining him at times acutely. And it surprised him, too, to find that before he had been there long the Earl,

still thoughtful for others, had read a something wrong with Hugh, and had won him to tell him of this trouble which was come into his home.

But Leaholme did not receive this tale quite as Hugh had expected. He said no hard words of Sir Randal; no reproachful ones of Pollie; no pitying ones to Hugh himself. He only said—his grave eyes puzzled and perplexed—"I cannot understand this, Delahoyde, so I cannot speak of it. It seems so almost impossible to me to be hard and unforgiving towards the one in all the world who loves and trusts in you. If I—I am a lonely fellow, Delahoyde, and do not know much about it, you will say—but if I had a wife as you have, and she loved me as your wife loves you; and had lived with me, as you two have lived together, in close and dear communion, I could not have room in my heart for cruel suspicion and mistrust."

Hugh began to dissent, but stopped, noticing the weary face, and feeling sure he

ought not to bring any harassing thought here. He held out his hand silently.

"I ought not to have spoken to you at all of this. Pardon me, dear my lord."


"I am getting better, Delahoyde, quite rapidly," Leaholme answered, cheerily. "Dr. Thurtees—my kind physician, who came with me from Germany—is coming down here in a day or two, to set me entirely right. I shall soon be among my people again. I am glad you came for I had just been feeling, with Byron, 'the solitude of passing my own door without a welcome.' I little imagined there would be sorrow in your bright little home, Delahoyde; that is worst of all. It will be but a short one for you both, though, I feel sure, and you will tell me so when you come again. You have so often taught us yourself how unhesitatingly, how unquestioningly God pardons us, without our faults bearing a word of excuse, that you will be the first one, Delahoyde, to try to do—ever so little—as He does."

And Hugh had gone back to his gloomy house, feeling for the first time very uncomfortable about his own share in this sad variance. As he tried to make it clear to himself, and to go back to his old hard thoughts, Hester came in to him.

"Mr. Delahoyde," she said, in her low, gentle voice, "my uncle is away, and I want particularly to go to Aberswys to see an old friend. Would you take me? I cannot bear to go with the servants."

He started up, willing and anxious to do anything for her, as he had always been; anxious, too, that she should not see how her request had astonished him. Of course Miss Bruce knew that his wife was at home, he felt, and of course she knew nothing but that, so there was no fear of any rebuke from her.

They walked together to the station, smiling and nodding to the villagers as they passed; their own the two saddest hearts in all Ruyglen. It was a slow train, and what a nightmare a slow train is when the heart beats and



pants for the end of the journey! But even a slow train generally reaches its destination eventually, and at last it stopped in the dreary, empty, little town.

Old Street, Hugh thought, was as much changed from its summer aspect as his own married life. He grew a little pale as Hester stopped at the green door which he remembered so well, but they were only taken into a shabby little cheerless parlour which he had never seen before.

"If you will sit here just for a few minutes, Mr. Delahoyde," Hester said, "I shall be ready."

"Pollie," she began, entering her room as if she had never left it, but kissing her as if she had been away a year; "Pollie, have you written to Hugh, as I recommended?"

"I scrawled a line, but I want you to burn it. You know you promised it should not be posted."

"Of course I did, and I always keep my word. Give it me."

"Burn it for me, please," entreated Pollie, and Hessie closed her fingers on it.

It was a piteous appeal for forgiveness—for baby's sake—breaking off into a cry for justice; but Hessie did not read it. She took the baby tenderly from beside Pollie, and laughing at the mother's faint expostulations, carried it down to the old drawing-room,—where Hugh had spent many a happy hour in that past Summer—and laid it on the sofa with Pollie's written words under its tiny hand. Then, with dim eyes, she closed the door and went downstairs.

"Mr. Delahoyde," she said, joining him, "I have a few more minutes to wait, but cannot unless you will come upstairs to a warmer room."

"I do not mind at all, Miss Hester."

"Come, please," and he followed her.

She opened the drawing-room door a little way, standing back as he passed in; then shut it softly.

"Oh! Pollie, Pollie," she whispered, bend-

ing a glad face over her, "where do you think baby is?"

"With nurse, I suppose," said Pollie, smiling.

"Yes, with the dearest, kindest nurse that he will ever have—except his mother. Oh, Pollie, baby is in his father's arms!"

Hugh sat with the blurred paper in his hand; his baby, his own little one, his first-born, held to his beating, softened heart. He had sat long so, yet hardly realised it all, when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and a happy face bent close to his.

"Pollie is waiting for you," Hester said, a little shyly.

She took the baby from him, and pointed to Pollie's door. His step faltered a little, but when Hester heard Pollie's little cry of joy she shut the door upon herself and baby, and sang him to sleep in the most business-like manner.

That night, before Hester went to her room leaving the husband and wife sitting together

happy and united, she gave Hugh Sir Randal's letter.

"I would not give it you before," she explained a little timidly, "because I knew Pollie would value your return more if it showed trust without a proof. And that you yourself would rather look back upon to-night if all you did had been done straight from your heart. Now it will be better to read it."

And Hugh read it, and re-read it, and then—both humbled and ashamed as he was—it became Pollie's turn to comfort and forgive.

And she did it with a great many tears, but they were not melancholy ones at all.

And HESSIE stood at the window and looked out upon the cheerless scene, while the restless fretting of the waves upon the shore seemed moaning that the Summer time which she and they had known was gone for ever. She tried to re-people the place as it was then; bring the dancing sparkle to the waters, and bright faces to the shore. But there was

nothing but the chilling darkness and the restless, shuddering wind, and no remembrance would come back to her but the shivering loneliness of that little tower by the lake.

CHAPTER XIV.

"MR. BRUCE," said Hugh, when he brought Hester home on the Saturday night, "I ought to apologise humbly for letting Miss Bruce tire herself for me and mine, but I feel as if I could not, for she has done so much for my wife and baby that I cannot try to speak of it."

Mr. Bruce laughed cheerily.

"Come in to dinner, the task will be easier afterwards."

But Hugh declined, hastening away again as Hessie knew he would, and she and her uncle dined alone together again very cheerfully.

"Any news, uncle?" she asked, at last, fearing he heard her heart beat as she asked it.

"No, dear, nothing particular has transpired even in these long two days, which seem to have been so eventful to Delahoyde. Poor fellow! how radiant he is in his new character. I did hear a report that Leaholme had returned, but of course it is a mistake as Tom was to have come down with him. I wish he would come; I think he will be better here. Your Aunt and Bella did not see him in town as he was not well enough to be about, and Tom tells me that when he made that splendid speech the other night in the House (which I put away for you to read), they were whispering in the gallery that it was a case of Lord Chatham over again. I should have been afraid so, too, if I had been there. Your aunt was vexed that she was not. Oh! by-the-bye, they are on their way home, Hessie, staying a day or two with the Dyotts. They bring Lydia back with them to stay over

the wedding. Of course Hemming comes too. It is to be on the last Thursday in November. There, dear, that is all the news, I think. Oh! no, I forgot the principal item. They are bringing you your bridesmaid's dress all complete, as it is supposed."

"At your request, I suppose, uncle?"

"Well, as the bridesmaids seemed to be allowed no choice in the affair, I thought they need not have any trouble."

"Thank you, uncle Alf. And—and Tom."

"Oh! Tom I am expecting daily. He is to be at his post in December. That, I believe, decided them about the wedding-day. The Hemmings are all coming down here for it. There are plenty of them, and all very imposing. That is all."

That was all! Hessie crept out, and lingered in the chill, night air, dreading the empty drawing-room. The whole sky was black with clouds, except just where, above the river the crescent moon was setting. So dark it was that she would not have known

there was a river there at all, but for just one little golden ripple where the reflection played. And now and then a lightning sheet flashed out upon the darkness.

There was nothing more for her to hear now. There would be nothing more perhaps for her to hear for ever, save the gay particulars of Bella's wedding, and other spiritless, soulless things in which her heart's deep, aching wishes could have no part. Hessie checked the thought as quickly as she could. Never, if she could prevent it, should her heart grow thankless and unsympathising, and her life without an aim.

"Oh! God, who has given me so much," she cried, "give me patience through this Thy punishment, and faith to look beyond it. If my heart grows dark and cold, let Thy love break and brighten it as Thy light seems to pierce this gloomy night, straight out from Heaven."

She turned in slowly and opened the piano in the great, empty drawing-room, but the

first notes she struck touched some inner chord, and made it vibrate sadly. She leaned her elbows on the music desk before her, and covered her face, feeling how she had made a wailing discord of her life—and of his.

"If he had never loved me," she moaned in her thoughts, "if he had never loved me we might both be happy now. And yet I cannot wish it. I cannot even wish that he had never taught me to love him."

"Why, HESSIE dear, playing with your elbows?"

She raised her head hurriedly, and her uncle looked at her surprised.

"Why how is this, my child? I never saw such a woful little face. What are you thinking of, here all alone?"

"I was just beginning to think, Uncle Alf," she answered, slowly, the little wan face brightening at his coming, "that Dante, —and then of course Tennyson and Longfellow—made a mistake about 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow.'"

"Why, what is it they say? Something, isn't it, to the effect that a sorrow's crown of sorrow is the remembrance of happier things, or times, or something?"

"Something to that effect, yes, uncle," she said, smiling, "you don't remember the words very exactly."

"Not I. And you think poor ignorant little Alighieri originated a mistake, which his successors have blindly followed, do you, little wiseacre?"

"Yes, I think that a sorrow's crown of sorrow must be remembering dreary things; things that we might have made happy if we had been good and wise, remembering them when it is too late; don't you, uncle?"

"I will tell you, dear, when I am suffering from remorse. You will understand it better when you are doing so too. Play for me now, a bit of Mozart, and don't slip into Beethoven as you generally do."

"I like him better, uncle,—on the piano," said Hessie, loitering over her music and dreading to begin.

So long she was that the tea came in in time to prevent her; and that was only just over when the station fly once more brought Tom home—so gentle and pleasant that he seemed to bring a whole houseful of sunshine in for Hessie. They all had another tea together, and an hour's pleasant chat. Then Mr. Bruce went to his study, and Tom and Hester drew up nearer to the fire and talked together of his new life, and new ambition.

"I stay at home now until after the wedding," he said, "and first I must go and see Leaholme. Has he been here since he came down to the Abbey?"

"He isn't come to the Abbey, Tom."

"Yes, dear, he came on Thursday. I travelled with him part of the way. I shall go over after service in the morning. I want to thank him, here at home, more earnestly and sensibly than I have ever been able to do."

"Lord Leaholme is not at Wye, Tom, really; Uncle Alf says so," replied Hessie wonderingly.

"You will see, dear," smiled Tom. "You

will see him at church in the morning, perhaps, but you must be prepared to see him greatly changed, dear; and his right arm—What, going already?”

“It is very late, Tom.”

“Darling,” he said, looking anxiously into her face, “I wish I could see the old roses back which I scared with my—profligacy. I sometimes can hardly believe you have forgiven me, Hessie—or that he has.”

“Do you know, Tom,” she answered, very softly, “I was thinking only to-night how very differently I and—he—forgive. How nobly he has been forgiving all his life—how meanly and weakly I have tried—*that* made the difference, Tom—he never had to try at all. That made the difference.”

“Hush, dear, think what you have forgiven me, and—”

“Tom, you promised me you would not mock me by saying that again. Oh! if you knew how it hurt me!”

“I never will. Good-night, my little good

angel. You have been too much alone lately. I shall not go to Wye to-morrow after all. I wish Leaholme would come home with us instead."

"Uncle Alf is going to Rebbington Church in the morning," said Hester.

"Is he ? then I *certainly* cannot leave you. I will beg Earl Leaholme to come with us to lunch. You will not look so tired then, my dear."

CHAPTER XV.

THE old roses were back—they were very soft pink roses at any time—and the big dark eyes were full of hope and happiness next morning, when Hester made Tom halt in the village to speak to little Hester Moore and her mother.

“How gay she looks, Anna,” exclaimed Hessie, with the child in her arms. “Are you going to take this atom to church with you?”

“No, ’m. Ezra’s gone to church this morning, but his lordship said, when he passed on Thursday, that he would call in and see how Hetty grew as he went to church this morning. So I dressed her, expecting him; but he’s left the Abbey again now, I hear, ’m.”

"Left again?" echoed Tom, as Hessie bent her head upon the baby's.

"Yes, sir, so they say. I thought he was at Churleigh, may be, till Ruth and James called in just now. I suppose he's gone on a bit of a visit. I don't think evil as Ezra always does, poor lad, when he can't quite follow a thing."

"What does Ezra say?" asked Hester, in a low, strange voice.

"He says, 'm—but then he's very silly at times is Ezra"—answered Anna, checking herself with a quick, curious look into Hester's face, "he says all sorts of rubbish."

"I suppose he has seen a ghost, or heard one," laughed Tom.

"That's exactly what he pretends, sir ; he says he saw a white ghost beckon to him among the ruins down by the lake, as he came home the other side it last night. No wonder either, I say, because he oughtn't to have been there. And I should think it was his conscience," added his wife, rather sharply, as Tom guessed why poor Ezra's conscience

should have been pricking him—or beckoning to him, as Anna represented.

“I dare say it was,” said Tom, pleasantly. “What a good thing, though, that his conscience is white, if it must haunt him.”

“Haunt him it did, sir, indeed; and kept on so haunting him, that he was wretched company; and this morning I got him to promise to go straight and tell the master. The parsons know how to explain those sort of things away, sir, and it’ll make Ezra a bit ashamed.”

“We will call as we go back, Anna, and hear the explanation,” said Hester, quietly. “Now, Tom, the bells have actually stopped.”

But though they had done so, the service had not begun; nor did it begin until Tom had looked at his watch three times, and shown Hessie, at the last, that it was a quarter past eleven.

Then Mr. Ferriman walked up the aisle alone and performed the service nervously. But no tall, handsome head stood alone

under the marble tablets, and those of the congregation who had gone on purpose to see it, settled in their seats discontentedly ; and fretfully muttered the responses with their lips alone.

Hester did not go in at Ezra's cottage as she passed. Anna was standing at the door looking for her husband, whose dinner, she said, was spoiling. After that, Hessie walked on beside Tom rather quietly.

They had just reached home, and were standing at the drawing-fire together, when Hugh Delahoyde walked straight into the room, hurried and nervous, despite the quietness he assumed in Hester's presence.

"Mr. Lane," he began, turning to Tom, almost before his greeting was over, "will you lend me the key you possess of that fishing tower in the park at Wye?"

"Certainly; though it looks bad for the Rector to be seen fishing on a Sunday morning; weak, too, at this time of year."

But Hugh had no smile in answer.

"I want you to come with me, too, if you will," he said.

"With pleasure; stay one moment."

He went into the study where the key was kept, and came back examining it curiously.

"How is this, I wonder?" he said, in a tone of real astonishment. "This is Lord Leaholme's key. Who can have had mine?"

"I had it, Tom," replied Hessie; "I had yours on Friday. I went to the tower myself, but I brought the key back, and that is it."

"Not a bit of it, dear; this is Leaholme's own key. Look; the title is engraved on the ring."

"Yes, I see," said Hester, as she read it; "you must have exchanged sometime, you see."

"No; I left my own in the study here, I am sure."

"Do not wait, please," interrupted Hugh, anxiously; "would you mind driving over with me now?"

Tom went at once to put on his coat and hat.

"Miss Hester," said Hugh, suddenly, "try—for Heaven's sake try—to tell me how the key was changed. Tell me exactly what you did the day you were there."

She told him the simple fact of having forgotten the key; there was little else that she either remembered or could have told.

"You are sure you had left the key in the door?" he asked.

"Why, of course, I must have done. Did I not find it in the keyhole?"

"I do not know."

"But how else could it have been?" she asked, unable to follow him.

"I cannot tell yet, Miss Bruce; please, think nothing of it," said Hugh, in sudden pity for the girl who, since the night he first saw her on the seashore, had always seemed to him one from whom gloom and sorrow should be far removed.

Ah! Hugh little guessed the anguish that

the loving heart had already borne, and had still to bear!

“Now, Delahoyde, I am ready,” said Tom, coming in to bid Hessie good-bye. And they were gone before she recovered from her bewilderment.

CHAPTER XVI.

HESTER went to the little school-house in the park, and told the children to read to her. They read to her of things she had a vague and dreamy consciousness of having heard before, and she smiled as they finished, and dismissed them : kissed one little old-fashioned face ; lifted a lame boy over the stile ; then ran home again, rapidly as the very youngest child there could have run.

“ No, Mr. Lane had not returned,” James told her ; “ but a messenger had arrived half an hour ago, and the master had set off for Wye immediately, on horseback.”

There was no fixed purpose in Hester’s

mind; she only knew that the agony of staying in the empty house would be more than she could bear; so she walked on quickly, through the park, and out into the high road. We hardly know how far or fast we walk when the road is straight, and our one intense longing lies before us, and a lonely, dreary dread behind. So Hessie never thought of the long miles she walked in her eager unrest, as the twilight faded.

She never noticed that the bells were not ringing their usual Sunday evening chime, she had almost forgotten what day it was. She never hesitated for a moment, until she found herself at the west lodge of the Abbey; then she stopped a moment, tottering feebly. No one was about at the pretty little cottage. She tried the door, but it was locked; so she passed on up the grand old avenue, along which she and Tom had driven on that evening when she had dashed her cup of happiness to the ground with her own passionate hand. It was all so still in

the dying light, that the deer among the fern far off started at her quiet footstep before she could even see them. As she came in sight of the great, silent house, two gentlemen came through the doorway out upon the broad white terrace steps. One, who was a stranger to her, spoke a few words and turned back into the house. The other came towards her astonished.

"Uncle, oh ! uncle, tell me," she whispered, breathlessly, clasping his arm.

"Hessie, dear, why are you here ? You must go back, my child."

"Yes, uncle ; but I must know what I have done."

But he could tell her nothing ; he was obliged to break off, even in his rebuke to her for being there.

"Stop, I will send Tom," he said, suddenly.

And while she stood upon the steps, leaning for support against one of the pillars, Hugh Delahoyde came out to her, and gently gave her his arm.

"We must walk to the yard," he said, "if you can, Miss Bruce ; not to bring the carriage round upon the gravel, the wheels make such a noise."

"Mr. Delahoyde," began Hessie, with an intense effort, "I cannot get Uncle Alf to tell me what is the matter."

"This evening has unmanned him, Miss Hester ; he loves Lord Leaholme more, if possible, than we do."

"Where is Lord Leaholme?"

"He lies up there, very, very ill."

Poor Hugh's voice was faltering, and his effort not to alarm her was a vain one.

"Where was he?"

"In—in the little upper room in the tower."

Hester's fingers closed with a sharp grip on Hugh's hand, and her eyes grew darker and darker as they pierced his.

"Go on ! go on !—or—I shall die."

And he felt that any hesitation on his part would be worse to her than the truth.

"He was locked in, and in his weakness and with his wounded arm he was helpless to summon aid—even if aid had been within reach. He tied his handkerchief to the iron bars of the window, and Ezra saw it and was afraid, and came to me. When I found it, I came to you (as you know) for the key. That was Earl Leaholme's key. Mr. Lane's—the one you had used—was picked up to-day in the wood, where you must have dropped it. When you went back Lord Leaholme had gone in; and it was two days afterwards that we found——Oh! Miss Hester, can you hear me?"

No. Not a sound; the wide eyes could not even see him. He put his arm round her, but she did not stir or lean upon him in the slightest. It was not until Tom came that they could get her to go round to the carriage. When she did, she walked beside them, very still and slow; motioned them away as she took her seat, and was driven home alone in the haunted darkness.

CHAPTER XVII.

THOSE days of fear and waiting dragged by wearily. Mrs. Bruce and Bella were at home again, and had brought Mr. Hemming and Lydia with them. Bella's great excitement about her approaching wedding almost gave place to another excitement now. She talked hour after hour of Lord Leaholme's illness, and cried so noisily sometimes that even poor Mr. Hemming found it impossible to soothe and quiet her.

And through these long, long days Hester lived in a restless solitude, only hanging on every word she heard, and hiding the pain and penitence of her own heart. She almost lived out of doors, for the atmosphere of the

house oppressed her, and, when she could, she wandered along the road towards Wye—always hoping for Tom to come. Morning, noon, or night that hope would take her into the broad, silent road whenever she could slip away alone.

She had wandered a long way one chill, bleak afternoon, when she met Hugh, walking slowly and tiredly along. Hessie, who had her own thoughtful, self-forgetting nature through all, noticed this, and gently begged him to come on and rest, and he could be driven back.

“No; I will not come on now, Miss Bruce,” he answered, quietly, “I was only coming to see you. I only cared to see you. We—we think you are lonely and sad now, and as Pollie cannot come, she will be happier if I can tell her of you.”

“Thank you,” spoke Hessie, softly. Pollie is always kind. Have you come from Wye?”

“Yes, and am going back. Mr. Lane is coming home for to-night.”

“Then how is Lord Leaholme now?”

“Just the same, I think, though Dr. Thurtees fancies his strength daily more exhausted. I think that is a mistake, as well as what he told me to-day; the other physicians never said so.”

“What does Dr. Thurtees think?” asked Hessie, slowly.

“That what Earl Leaholme most wants is the wish and desire to get well, and the consequent effort. It is impossible, for he is such a brave, unselfish man that he would make the effort if he could, justly valuing God’s gift of life and health.”

“He does not seem to—wish to—get—well—do you say?” questioned Hessie, with pauses between the words.

“No; I did not say so. Only Dr. Thurtees fancied—not exactly what you say, Miss Bruce—but that Lord Leaholme has not pleasure enough in his life to tempt him back to it with sufficient power in the longing. Do you understand?”

“Yes. What sort of pleasure?”

"I hardly know—love and sympathy, I should fancy Dr. Thurtees means. Surely he has every other pleasure in the life he leads. Such an earnest life!" Hugh went on, sadly, "a life of chivalrous hopes and noble aims; a life of high endeavours and fearless acts; yet—like that of the Master whom he loves—a life of brave and true humility."

"And you think?" asked HESSIE, in a strange, calm voice.

"I think—I think there is very little change day after day. Yet I think," the quiet, gentle voice trembled, though—looking straight along the road as he spoke—he never guessed the agony his words brought into the beautiful, pale face beside him, "I think he must be 'entering within the borders of peace and rest.' We ought not to grieve, and wish it otherwise," added Hugh, the tears falling from his eyes as he tried to lean upon his simple faith, "but it is hard to help it. He is so patient; so more than patient; so brave and comforting, even in his utter

weakness; if you can understand. Do you know, Miss Bruce, that it is the most touching sight to see him and your cousin together. Mr. Lane is so wonderfully, girlishly tender; and Lord Leaholme, watching his loving care, looks a little like his old self. He is only allowed to speak a few words now and then, but even those Mr. Lane can hardly bear. I see him creep away," added Hugh, with a gulp, "and in the darkness I have often heard him sob as if his heart were breaking."

They walked together in silence for a time, then Hugh, wiping his eyes quietly, spoke again with a vain effort to be cheerful.

"I came to try to cheer you, Miss Bruce, as well as to tell Pollie of you; and see how I have done it! But, indeed, in all our fear, we must know that it is all joy for him, for through the gates of Death—which seem open to him—he, we know, can see the Throne of God."

Poor Hugh remembered for long afterwards how strangely Hester had bidden him good-

bye; with what a far away quietness she spoke to him, sending a loving message to Pollie, and thanking him for coming to her. And through all his lonely walk he saw the little wistful face, and the wide, yearning eyes which he had left in the lonely road, waiting—as he guessed—until Tom should come.

When Tom came at last, she stood before him, looking into his face with intense eagerness, but asking no question.

So strangely gentle she was to him always now; so tenderly, so lovingly thoughtful; so accustomed to put away her own thoughts when he came, that this new look on the beautiful pleading face to-night frightened him.

“Hessie, darling,” he said, one slight tremulous hand on each of her shoulders, “what is the longing in your eyes?”

“To see him.”

She said no more, but the beseeching gaze brought a tearful answer.

“Yes, dear; to-morrow.”


Most of that night Hessie sat up, trying to gather strength and patience for any trouble that might be coming.

At last the dawn crept slowly down the hills; the bright little roses in the sheltered corner outside her window, looked up rejoicing in the light. Everything forgot, in its morning strength and promise, that there would come the drooping sigh at eventide, and the weary wish that the work were over with the day.

The sun had risen coldly and brightly, and Hessie stood at her window repeating a few lines which had stolen into her head.

“I think the old Abbot at Hirschau says them,” she whispered to herself, “but I am not sure, though the words themselves have lived so in my memory—

“ ‘Upward steals the life of man,
As the sunshine from the wall,
From the wall into the sky,
From the roof along the spire;
Ah! the souls of those that die,
Are but sunbeams lifted higher.’ ”



"I suppose they are ; but though the sunbeams, I suppose, would be the brighter there, it leaves it very gloomy for us here among the heavy shadows."

When Hester entered the breakfast room, Bella was crying bitterly, Mr. Hemming trying, as usual, to console her, telling her (what she knew quite well) that though the morning tidings from the Abbey were not better, still they were not worse. Lydia was crying for sympathy; Mrs. Bruce was very quietly pouring out the tea, for prayers had been dispensed with on account of Bella's tears; and Mr. Bruce was slowly walking about the room, anxious and troubled.

"Uncle Alf," said Hessie, her low, clear voice startling them all a little, "Tom is going back to the Abbey. May I go with him?"

"Why, dear?"

"Because I—Oh! uncle Alf, I must see Lord Leaholme."

The words came with a low cry of unutter-

able pain, and Mr. Bruce looked down quickly. Then he paused a little, and kissed her softly.

"Yes, dear, you shall go—with Tom."

Bella, forgetting her own grief, stared uncomprehendingly. Mrs. Bruce coldly asked her what was the matter.

"Give the child a cup of tea, Isabel," said Mr. Bruce, in a quiet tone, which stopped further questioning.

Hessie went up to the table and took the cup from Mr. Hemming as he passed it to her; but when she put her white, shivering lips to it, she could not drink, and turned away with a wan little smile.

"Cannot you take your breakfast, Hester?" asked Mrs. Bruce, significantly.

"It is only a hindrance, is it, Hessie?" said her uncle, kindly. "So Tom thinks too. Here he is! waiting, you see. I believe he forgets all about his meals now. Hemming, just bring a cloak or two out here. All right James, you may go."

Hessie knew why he sent the servants away, and it made her "Thank you, uncle," all the more heart-felt as she kissed him on the steps.

" 'Thank you,' indeed !" he muttered, watching the two sad young faces, as Tom and Hessie drove away. "She would say it if her heart were breaking—as I believe it is to-day. Poor Leaholme ! his is just the heart to win her love, and hers is just such love as he deserves to win. Poor little darling !"

Neither Tom nor Hester spoke all through that drive, but as they turned into the bare, silent avenue at Wye, he turned, and, stooping from his high seat, kissed her very quietly.

The great house looked gloomy and deserted in the winter morning. No sound or sign of active, busy life was there without ; no warmth, or brightness. But when Hessie entered the high arched hall, and stood among the plants and statues, the gorgeous colours from the great stained window fell around her

and upon her, with a beauty both warm and bright. She passed the organ without daring to look at it, and went slowly up the broad stairs, her face almost as still as the pictured ones above and beside her.

Tom stopped her at a door on the first wide gallery, and passed it himself alone. Presently he joined her again and took from her her hat and cloak, giving them to the housekeeper who had quietly followed her upstairs. Then; — in her pretty bright dress, so soft and spotless, the rich curls hanging from the high cluster of plaits, just the dainty little figure of the old Aberswys day, save for one look on the beautiful young face which told of its having known some deep, unspoken tribulation different from all the other sorrows of her sad youth; — she noiselessly entered a long, grand, glittering room.

Here the physicians stood, Hugh with them looking from the window with his back to her.

Tom spoke to Dr. Thurtees, who turned and

bowed gravely as he took her little white hand; then held it in his own a minute as if testing its strength and calmness.

"It is a chance," he said to Tom, "and we have no other. Let us at least try it. Gentlemen, if you consent, we may as well go downstairs for a time."

They passed out with Hugh, who still could not trust himself to look into her face, and Tom moved on to another door.

"Hessie," he whispered, his fingers on the handle, "You are sure you wish it? If not, it will but give him greater pain."

"It is the only thing I do wish, Tom."

"God bless you, dear."

He opened the door noiselessly as he spoke, and she passed on alone into the shaded, silent room beyond.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THERE was no faltering in the quiet step as it entered the grand and stately room; and beside the couch at the fire Hester stood and looked down upon the pale, lined face asleep upon the pillows; the face so well remembered, so dearly loved. She knelt down, her head resting on her clasped hands just on a level with his, and in the silence he opened his eyes slowly; opened them upon a story of love which, months ago, he would have read in a moment and without one word.

“Hester,” he said, in a voice so quiet, so far away from all surprise that it seemed to stop the beating of her heart.

Her hands were dropped, and her face fell upon them.

"Hester, are you come to me at last?"

But even *his* words could not reach her in her intense and silent prayer. There was a little pause before he spoke again.

"Look up, my dear one. Is it a dream? I have dreamed this so often."

She raised her eyes to his with a wistful longing; yet still she could not speak.

"The dear face I have been dreaming of is changed," he said; "have *you* had any pain to bear, my child?"

"Oh! *such* a pain," she cried, breathlessly.

"Hester, you do not blame yourself for— for anything you have said to me?" he asked, struggling to speak firmly and cheerfully.

"My pain," she whispered, "has been a greater, deeper one than you could ever know, because I caused it by my own sin."

"How have you sinned?" The few low words betrayed a tremble in his voice which was not weakness.

Hessie's whispered answer was very distinct in the perfect silence. "I took God's justice into my own hands; and, while He Himself had punished, I blindly tried to punish too. And—and while I tried,—the bitter pain I gave—fell—on my own heart."

"Tell me how, Hester," he said, quietly and soothingly, and speaking as if it were quite natural to have her there; or (as she felt when she looked at him) with no strength or power to be surprised, there on the threshold of eternity; there with the light upon his face of that unutterable glory which must be dawning. Once more Hessie clasped her hands together, so tightly that the marks remained through many days; and her breath came quickly as she tried to begin. She heard the old tender voice. "Do not tell me if it pains you, dear one," and that broke down her trembling hesitation. In pitifully broken words she told him the story of her life, and of its great mistake.

There was no sound nor movement until she

ended with the few low, hopeless words—"And I knew my punishment was just."

Then he asked slowly, "What punishment?"

She had expected that he would understand; guessing how he had taught himself to understand her long ago; but, though her cheeks flushed, she said with a truthful, earnest simplicity, "In my blindness I had tried to stop your loving me; and through all my bitter repentance I felt that you had done so."

He had risen a little, even in his weakness, and was looking down upon her with unspeakable joy and tenderness.

"Hester, Hester," he murmured, "This is not pity, not compassion. This is love—love come at last. I shall not let you go again, my dear, dear love."

She rose and took his throbbing head upon her shoulder, listening with full eyes to the soft, low voice, which was fading fast, as he whispered loving, grateful words.

"My own at last; and I have lain here in the night, feeling glad in all my pain because

you had not had this love to bear; because you had not known the one grief that you had given me; because you would not sorrow deeply when—my pain shall cease—as you would have sorrowed if—if I had won the love I sought. Yet now that my blessing is sent to me, I am too selfish to say it was best before.”

“Nothing can ever be so hard to me,” whispered Hessie, softly stroking the thick dark hair, “as not having told you of this strong, undying love of mine.”

“Undying,” he murmured. “Strong and everlasting. I can see it in your eyes, my darling. So long ago I learned to read the little truthful face!”

“A wicked, angry face it used to be,” she said, the tears starting at last.

“Very angry sometimes,” he answered, gently, “but only to me; never to others. How hard it was to understand you, Hester, yet I never gave up all hope—treat me as you would—until the night Tom told me—”

"Oh! hush," she sobbed, "I dare not think of my own mistakes and blindness now that I have learned to understand you."

"Who taught you to understand me, Hessie?"

"Perhaps Tom—perhaps myself;—perhaps—you."

He raised her face with his left hand, for she was trying to hide her tears.

"I was right you see after all, my little queen; it was not indifference. I knew it even on the miserable day when—What a sad little face!—I was going to say when we fought over croquet."

"And I tried so hard to think it was," she answered, with a faint little smile.

"Shall I let you go this time, my beloved?"

She laid her face against his pillows, and he put his arm round her.

"It is a weak protection," he said sadly, as he looked down on his right hand, helpless in its sling, "but it can never let you go again, my cherished one."

"Never," she answered, with a brave,

bright little smile. "A weak protection if you like, but my chosen rest and home."

"How I used to pray and long for that," he said, softly; "then how I tried to be brave in losing you, Hester, my child, my love. How fully and mercifully my prayer is answered now. Look up, my own," he whispered raising her face. And for the first time their lips met in a long, lingering kiss.

"Hessie," he said, his full eyes looking far down into hers, "it is far harder to be 'thankful for all God takes away' than 'humbled by all he gives.' I feel so proud now in my gladness; I cannot help it."

"But all this is not right," said Hester, fighting with her tears, as she noticed once more how white and wasted was the face above her. "The doctors will be angry with me. I must really go."

"No, not yet; but even that would make no difference. Do you not know that you will be now for ever in my sight, Hessie."

She was placing the cushions for him; and as he lay back, rather wearily spite of the

dazzling brightness in his eyes, he looked up, gently detaining her.

"Hessie, the cloud I saw across the river as we stood in the Abbey ruins has passed, and left my sky a brilliant blue. Do you remember, dear one?"

"Oh! hush," she cried, her face full of pain. "I have so thought of it. My hand it was, you know—my hand that—that left you there. That one thought will be a life-long punishment."

"My darling, an unconscious deed like that needs no punishment. This tiny hand, was it?" he asked, holding it to his lips, "this dear little hand which is my own? Shall I tell you what I dreamed down there in the dark and loneliness, Hessie?"

"N-o-o," she whispered, "I cannot bear it. Why were you there at all?"

"I was not trespassing, Miss Bruce," he answered, with a tired little smile, "so I am not to be called to account by somebody who was trespassing."

"But, really, why were you there?" she

pleaded, too sadly earnest to return his smile.

“I had been sitting here alone all day, not very well, nor very—brilliant,” he said, slowly, “and Delahoyde called, and told me he was in trouble;—But you know what he told me, for I have heard your part in that happy reunion;—and when he was gone, I grew still more lonely thinking of—things, and restless, too, and strayed down to the river, following it unconsciously as I recalled (as I have done so many and many a time) the day—that one sunny day—when you came to Wye. Dear, don’t look grieved; no memory of you was ever bitter to me even then, and do you think it can be now? I went into the old fishing tower, and slowly sauntered upstairs. I suppose I was ill at ease; I know the pain in my shoulder was very acute, and I tried to rest there. It must have been for but a little time, yet when I went down I found the door locked. At first I never imagined this would signify; I have not been

accustomed to feel easily baffled, and I forgot my helplessness. When at last I found out how utterly incapable I was, I still fancied some of my people would find me. So I rested, little guessing how comfortable they were in the idea that I was at Churleigh. It was the next morning that I tied my handkerchief to one of the window bars—the ghostly flag which, they tell me, frightened poor Ezra, and sent him for clerical aid. After I had hung out my signal, I forget what I did. I do not know more until I awoke here in my own room, with Delahoyde's kind face above me, and Tom's dear voice of gratitude in my ear—a little foretaste, darling, of the perfect happiness that was to follow."

"Are you really happy, Douglas?" asked Hester, with a long, wistful gaze into his white face, as she stood opposite him very still and quiet.

"That question is below your usual intelligence," he answered, turning from her plead-

ing eyes, as if he could not trust himself to read their love and fear. "Hester, what do you think I found in the fishing tower?"

"I know," she whispered, looking down upon the ring; on the middle finger now of his right hand; and touching it softly and caressingly.

"Yes. I found it there, my darling; and I have a fancy that I shall never lose it again. Ha! here is Tom."

He came in quietly, and looked at them both with rather a quizzical glance. Just the loving, pleasant Tom of old, but with a new thoughtfulness upon his fair young face, and a new earnestness in his gay young voice.

"She has quite tired you, Leaholme," he said, the words quivering a little as he laid his hand fondly on Hester's. "I always thought she would, but I dared not lock her out. She is a very obstinate little lady when she does not have her own way."

"Tom," Leaholme whispered, as Tom bent

to catch the low words, "you will not let her weary herself with me. Take her to ride and walk. I may not have the power to say this presently. Tom, dear fellow, do not let me be selfish and keep her beside me day and night, because she is willing to stay, and because I love to see her."

"I shall allow her admission very rarely," returned Tom, lightly; "that is to say, if she takes any notice of my permission—the probability of which I feel inclined to doubt."

In the quiet room that evening the Earl lay on his wide, low couch; the cheery glow of the fire lighting up his white face; deepening its look of earnest thankfulness, and adding to the wondrous brightness of his dark, glad eyes. Mr. Bruce, leaning forward on his seat, listened to the low, half whispered request.

"Hessie," he said, starting as if relieved when she came in to them, and hastily drawing his hand across his eyes, "do you know Leaholme wants me to give him my little favourite? Am I obliged to?"

"Not at all, uncle—if you object."

"I object; now what is to be done?"

"You must wait till I am twenty-one, my lord," said Hessie, gravely. "I can do what I like then."

"Take her, Leaholme," spoke Mr. Bruce, earnestly; "to no one else could I give her so willingly and happily."

"Thank you, uncle," whispered Hessie, answering Leaholme's bright and loving smile. "To no one else would I ever have asked you to give me."

Mr. Bruce left the firelit room with a picture in his mind, which for long was ineffaceable. A picture that was bright with a strange, steady brightness; yet a picture which had brought that anxious fear upon his face as he stood in the great hall at Wye, while his carriage waited.

"But there is hope? surely you think now that there is hope?" he asked the physician who was pacing slowly to and fro.

"Yes, there is hope," he returned, cautiously

and gently answering the hurried enquiry. "There is cause for hope now as there has not been before. There will be an incentive to get well; a desired impetus; but there is so much pain and so little strength to bear it, that I cannot help fearing that I am wrong to let you encourage any hope at all. This sudden happiness *may* do him harm instead of good. We can but wait and see."

CHAPTER XIX.

It was Sunday morning, and the Ruyglen bells pealed out their call to service. Mr. Bruce kissed his little boys (who had been sent for home for a few days), and put them into the carriage, telling them to take care of their mother. But, try as he would to avoid their ceaseless question, "When should they see Hessie?" he found it impossible to put them off.

"I will bring you word to-day," he said, "when I come back."

"Are you going now, and not coming to church, sir?" asked Mr. Hemming, leaning from his seat.

"Yes, I am going now," Mr. Bruce answered, in a quiet tone, which made his wife turn suddenly.

"Alfred, is the Earl worse?"

"How can I tell, my dear, until I go and see? Now, little ones, sit still in your seats."

"But do take us, papa," they pleaded.

"Not to-day, dear little fellows."

"Come, who is going to take papa's place?" interposed Mrs. Bruce, with unusual thoughtfulness. "Are you little boys going to quite tire him before he starts? Besides, you are to take care of us you know."

They sat down quietly and gravely. Mr. Bruce settled his wife's wraps, promised Bella and Lydia to be home soon, nodded pleasantly to Mr. Hemming, kissed his hand to Alf and Wattie, and turned to walk slowly to the Abbey, that haunting picture of the happy, weary face, so changed from the dauntless face of old, still most distinct of all before his eyes.

In the bright, frail, winter sunshine, Lord Leaholme sat propped upon his pillows, as the chimes crept softly into the grand, still room.

Only once before had Hester heard the Ruyglen peal from the old Abbey—only once; and though the notes might be the same, to her there was a deeper, truer lesson in the tone to-day. On that January afternoon, when she had first heard those bells, their story had rolled over the bright, frosty landscape to a gay and merry crowd of listeners. On this calm Sunday morning, its message floated along the faded autumn scene, and the listeners—only two—were very still and silent. Yet, as Hester sat beside Lord Leaholme, his hand between her own, she knew the soft peal echoing in the lofty room had whispered to her heart a glorious promise even then; and that now it rang for her in a melody most full, and most complete.

“Hessie,” he said, presently, looking down upon her thoughtful face, “I wonder whether we shall ever have a marriage peal?”

"Why not?" she asked, with a sudden flash of pain in her eyes.

"Because—if it is to be in our home up there—we shall not care about the bells, perhaps. My love, my dear, dear love, I feel as if *that*—our wedding peal from the old church there, which I love so well—could hardly bring us nearer to each other than we are to-day."

He looked longingly at the downcast head, as she did not answer.

"Little wife," he said it low and wistfully, but she could not look up. "Little wife, almost as truly as if we had stood together at God's altar, have you no word to say to me?"

She looked up at last, and something in his face shamed away her momentary shyness.

"Oh! my love," she whispered, "there is nothing that can bring us nearer to each other than we stand to-day—now—heart to heart."

"Yes—heart to heart."

And then there was a long pause, no voice but the distant, softened one of the bells breaking the silence. That at last died

lingeringly in the Sunday hush; and in his place Hugh rose and read to the grave-faced, anxious congregation, whose thoughts would wander to the grand, sad house, where the master, whom they loved, lay ill.

Mr. Bruce walked over the decaying leaves in the great Wye woods thoughtfully and very slowly, almost as if he feared the end of his walk. And Tom sat in one of the great stained windows on the Abbey staircase, the rich colours throwing a warm flush on his fair hair, and painting fantastically the open book upon his knee into which he had never glanced.

And at the window in the long, bright room beyond, Hessie still sat on her low seat beside the couch.

"Douglas," she said, "something has taken my thoughts back so vividly to-day to that first Sunday in Aberswys, when I dared not listen to your playing—for fear—"

"Never mind it, darling," he answered, gently touching the sad little face. "We are

at rest together now, and you never meant to hurt me; only to prevent my loving you—just as you might have tried to prevent the wave-beats on the shore.”

“And all that time the love was growing strong in my own heart,” she said. “That was the real struggle all the time, Douglas; to prevent acknowledging to myself how hard it was to really—”

“Hate me. Yes, I know. You have no idea how inexplicable it was to me sometimes. At first it was only amusing; at last—. But do not talk of that to-day. Sing to me, Hessie, just one thing; just the song you sang to yourself on that morning when I ‘earliest met her.’ You remember, my queen?”

“Oh! no, Douglas,” she cried, hurriedly, “not that—not that to-day.”

“Very well, dear,” he answered, gently, “never mind it to-day. But it seems always pleasant to think of that Land of the Leal.”

After a little pause she quietly raised her

head and sang it, very softly, tears in every sad, sweet line. And when she had finished she slipped down upon the floor beside him, her beautiful dark eyes wandering out afar among the little fluttering clouds.

"Sad thoughts again?" he asked, tenderly playing with the rich brown hair, "for yourself, or me?"

"I don't know," she answered, with a little gasp, "for you, I think. This pain and weakness—"

"Are very little, dear one, and only come at times. I wish it had not been to-day; yet this may prevent two days of it a little further on. Will you sing to me again?"

She tried to clear her voice of its tears.

"Could you follow the hymn with me?" she whispered. "Dear, will you try?"

"Yes."

The clear, sweet notes floated out—floated up, perhaps, into the vast bright dome above. Ay, though they were so very softly sung.

"Douglas," said Hester, kneeling beside

him and looking into his dazzling eyes with a strange, brave comfort, "once, long ago, on the seashore, when my heart was restless and angry, you said—the words have lived always clearly in my memory—Can you hear me?"

"Yes, plainly, dear one."

The voice was faint, despite its struggle.

"You said—

" 'Far out of sight, while sorrows still enfold us,
Lies the fair country where our hearts abide,
And of its bliss is nought more wondrous told us,
Than these few words—'I shall be satisfied.' "

"Yes, we shall be satisfied," he murmured, looking from her face out across the park to the fathomless blue beyond, and so resting silent for a time, a weary shadow growing in Hester's beautiful, grave eyes.

"Dearest," he whispered, looking again into the struggling little face beside him, "how happy we have been. If it is God's will to spare us to each other—how happy we shall be. But He knows—what is best. Raise my head a little and—kiss me. I dare not see the pain and love upon your face, my cherished

one; it is so dear to me—so dear. It has been such a light upon my way—for this happy time. A little higher; the pain is not great, my darling—and round us both are—the Everlasting arms.

“Hessie”—the whisper was but faint now “help me in the thought of what *you* may have to bear. Read to me His own words—‘Let not your heart—be troubled.’”

Her eyes were bent closely over the Book, and her low voice struggled to be calm and clear as she read the Saviour’s wondrous words of comfort. But at last the brave little head fell, and quick tears gushed from the overburdened heart—although it *was* told not to be troubled—falling in showers on the hot hand she held between her own.

“Have you been in, Tom?” asked Mr. Bruce, joining him as he stood motionless beside the closed door.

“I am just going,” said Tom, softly, “I think he must be asleep. I never before felt so unwilling to disturb them. I feel as if they needed nothing but each other.”

"They are always glad to see you, dear fellow. Come, here is Dr. Thurtees coming in too."

They entered the silent room together. They saw the dark head motionless upon the pillows; they saw the kneeling figure, of which nothing was visible save the soft black folds of the velvet dress, and the rich hair which fell over it; but they heard no sound and saw no movement. Dr. Thurtees walked swiftly to the couch in evident alarm; then, with one glance, went to prepare a restorative.

"Hessie, Hessie," cried Tom, in a low voice of intense pain, "look up."

But she never raised her face from the hand that was clasped within her own. Her uncle lifted her head gently.

"Uncle," she whispered, with wide, desolate eyes, "it is all dark unless I stay here. Oh! Tom, don't take me away."

Tom take her away!

Tom was on his knees beside her, pleading earnestly and penitently for the gift of this one valued life.

CHAPTER XX.

THE bright, uncertain, November sunshine lingered round the peaceful old grey church at Ruyglen; and peeping in under the heavy porch, laughed over the unusually gay apparel and the eager expectation of Mrs. Delahoyde and the three elderly ladies who stood there with her. Then it ran with a perfect gladness along the green churchyard; out into the smooth highway where larger groups stood in more noisy anticipation.

High over the open gate there stretched an arch of spotless white flowers; while down below, across the village street, there hung one broad festoon of every imaginable colour;

and from its centre a blue silk banner waved proclaiming "Health and Happiness to Brides and Bridegrooms."

Every man, woman, and child in Ruyglen had a holiday to-day ; for on this bright November morning Hugh Delahoyde was to perform a double wedding, "assisted by" no one but his own curate ; for Mr. Bruce had quietly but very decidedly negatived Bella's proposed plan for requesting the assistance of one or two distant connections of Edward Hemmings, who were either on the Bench, or rapidly advancing towards it.

As guests, Mr. Bruce said, he should be very glad to see them, but there was no occasion at all for the officiation of strangers.

And Bella muttered her discontent to Miss Hemming and Lydia, but did not attempt to argue with her step-father, who, as she knew, had been thoroughly in earnest when he said that his two daughters should be married on the same day, at their own church, and by their own clergyman.

Hessie knew that in this decision he was following out Lord Leaholme's wish as well as his own. That he was trying in everything to act and arrange as he fancied the Earl would have done had he been able to take his own part in superintendence and direction.

At first Bella feared she should have to delay her own marriage in consequence of this new freak, as she called it; but there had been no occasion, for Lord Leaholme was to spend the winter in the south, and Hessie would not hear of his going without her, herself entreating that the day should not be delayed, that they might go as soon as possible.

"But, Hester," Leaholme had said, anxiously awaiting her reply, "I wish you would think of it selfishly for a minute. Can you, sweet?—and tell me if—maimed as I am—"

"You dread the bore of a wedding, I see Douglas," she had answered, interrupting him

quickly, and trying to bring a reproachful look into her loving eyes. "Well, we will put it off for a few years."

And while he stroked her bright little head with a wondrously tender smile and touch, she went on softly.

"Even in the old stubborn days I felt a little proud (though quite against my will, of course!) of your medals, and honours, and—things. Douglas, there is only one thing I am prouder of, and that is this," and she touched the helpless arm which rested in its sling. "Oh! Douglas, when is your rest from pain to come?"

"My one pain is over now for ever, dearest."

So *they* were to be married too, on this last Thursday in November; and the crowds on either side the high white archway said there had never been such a show as this before in all the country round.

Of flowers there certainly never had. The brides walked over them, and under them; and,

to Hester's happy, bewildered eyes, they seemed to dance about her and caress her like greetings. According to accepted notions she ought to have seen nothing but the one form beside her, but she *did* see a great many things.

She saw her uncle's loving eyes upon her —so like her father's then, that she almost fancied he himself was there with a blessing for his child. She saw Mrs. Bruce graceful and magnificent in green moire and point lace. She saw the little boys in their rich velvet suits and silk stockings; Wattie serious and wondering; Alfy critical and mischievous. She saw Bella, gay and pretty in her glistening satin and bridal lace. She saw Mr. Hemming, scrupulous in attire, flushed and nervous. She saw Tom, handsome and well-dressed as in the old time; but earnestly and thoughtfully helping and watching all. She saw a vista of white, girlish figures, with black forms scattered here and there among them.

Still further away, she saw a medley of bright bonnets and bare heads, reaching on into another crowd, a crowd of shining, glowing faces. Not only old men and maidens, young men and children, but old women too, and these not in the smallest number. And everyone was in holiday dress ; and every man had a flower in his buttonhole, and every girl had a flower in her breast, for the great conservatories at the Abbey were thrown open, and the gardeners gave the flowers as they chose.

Hester, passing through this crowd, knew that the smiles which greeted her, and the low blessings which she overheard, were given her for her husband's sake ; and—feeling this, and valuing them the more perhaps for the knowledge—she looked up shyly into his face—looked up to meet the half proud, half humble look, which she had seen in his eyes just once before, and below it all some deep and quiet joy which she had never seen, she knew, before this day. And Hester found

she could not look up again, and walked on upon her husband's arm, listening to the glorious Wedding March.

"Pollie," said Hugh, to his excited little wife, as they stood at the Rectory windows to watch for the carriages on their way to the station, "I fear I made sad blunders in the Service to-day."

"You read it just as you ought to have read it," Pollie answered, readily, "but I didn't listen much. I was looking about me, I'm afraid. Wasn't it all pretty?"

"I hardly know, dear," returned Hugh, thoughtfully. "I did not feel to care to look at—many of them, and it made my voice falter to look at those I did care to see."

"You mean those two?" asked Pollie, softly.

"Yes, dear; because I could not help remembering what they had done for you and me. Look at the life he rescued me from a year ago! Look how he encouraged and helped me when I was almost too shy to

seek you, love ! Then think how I was living, hard, and cold, and unforgiving, when she brought me to you, and let me win your pardon without knowing what cause I had for shame in my suspicion and credulity ! Was it a wonderful thing, dear, that—as I made them husband and wife,—my voice should shake a little ?’

“No; no wonderful thing at all, Hugh, and how beautiful she looked !” continued Pollie, who could not settle her thoughts upon anything but what her eyes had taken to-day.

“Do you know I was quite afraid,” began Hugh, presently, “that Sir Randal Platt would have been there to-day.”

“Nonsense, Hugh; Mr. Lane told me he dared not show his face in Herefordshire; hardly in England. I wish he could have been. To see the happiness of this day would have been a rich punishment for him.”

Hugh laughed.

“Such men scarcely feelsuch punishments, dear. Yet, as far as we could see, he did

love Miss Bruce, or admire her, or whatever you call it, with all the heart and eyes he possessed ; and the losing of her may be a severe punishment to him. We do not know, and most probably never shall. Villains do not always come to tragic or untimely ends in real life, dear."

"I do not wish him to, Hugh," said Pollie, earnestly. "You never thought I did, surely. Mother," she added, suddenly, "come and sit here. You can see all down the road from here. They will not be late, you know, because they want to be at Leaholme Castle before nightfall for the Earl's sake. Not that they will manage it, I think—will they, Hugh?"

"They can be in before late, dear. They will go through without stopping once ; the special train is in now, waiting for them ; and it isn't a long drive on from Birmingham, as you know."

"Mother, do you remember with what intense awe we used to look at the Castle

when we caught a sight of it? I am glad now that we never went over it in those days. Is it very beautiful inside, Hugh?"

"It seemed so to me. It will seem doubly so to Lord Leaholme to-day."

"Hessie said they were only to stay there one day," continued Pollie, "and then they go southward at once, journeying in easy stages. Of course Mr. and Mrs. Hemming will come first," added Pollie, from her station of observation, "as they go to London by the three o'clock train. Do you know, Hugh, that Miss Lane has never spoken to Hester since she heard of her engagement to Lord Leaholme—never once, and living in the same house."

"Pollie," interposed Hugh, gravely, "I do believe Aunt Phyllis has a design in her head. Look! is not that a slipper sticking out of her pocket, do you see?"

Pollie laughed, but would not turn from the window.

"Please don't take baby, aunt," entreated


Hugh, merrily, "or you may mistake him for the slipper, and the throw would not be attended with such luck."

"Miss Berrington," said Pollie, gently turning to the old lady who sat near her looking out silently over her gold spectacles, "Did you see Hessie's glad surprise when she saw you in our pew to-day? I think it was just the unexpected pleasure to her that we fancied it would be. Hugh," she broke off; "Hugh, I hear the wheels, I think."

But Pollie had so often fancied she heard them, that no one was astonished when this proved a fancy too; and they still waited and watched, while the bells rang out their crashing, joyous peal.

CHAPTER XXI.

At Churleigh the wedding party had gathered in clusters out upon the terrace. Some of the good-byes were said. Some had to be given yet. A carriage packed high with travelling boxes drew up to the door, and the servants put in cloaks and coats and rugs. Bella's rosy face popped in and out among the crowd, giving and receiving numberless parting words and kisses. Mr. Hemming made many a hand ache in his grasp, and bestowed upon the merry group of bridesmaids many a harmless compliment. James closed the carriage door with an unusual bow. Bella nodded through the window. Hervey—appreciating his position



—pulled in the greys a little, and let them step daintily down the avenue. Out of sight at last, and Churleigh had lost one of its daughters.

As the great luxurious travelling-carriage from Wye rolled down from the yard, and turned upon the sweep, Leaholme grasped Tom's hand. "Remember your promise, dear old fellow. Let Hessie have you with her whenever you can. As for myself, I shall always be looking for my dear old nurse and companion."

"I only wonder how you are to prevent my coming too often," said Tom, his bright eyes rather dim.

"By telling you when you do it," replied Hessie, giving him her hand as Leaholme passed on. "So you will be sure to know when you *do* come too often. This is but a short good-bye, dear Tom."

"Hessie dear, the light that would have been the light of my life, will burn clearer in another atmosphere, I know. But I cannot

shut myself from it so—yes, I shall come as often as I can. Leaholme says I shall have many friends up there, helping me to support Government,” added poor Tom, with a forced gaiety, “but I shall always keep the warmest place in my heart for the two who have taught me what real friends can be. Hessie, what will Churleigh be without you? But that’s a selfish idea,” he added, quickly, “I ought to think what Leaholme’s home will be with you. And after all we shall do quite famously here, dear. The boys are such sociable little fellows; and now that mother has lost her charge she will be a truer companion to her husband. Oh! we shall be quite a jovial household presently. Farewell, my little good angel.”

But now Hester could not distinguish the happy faces, and was glad to hide her wet eyes and quivering face in the great closed carriage. It, too, rolled down the avenue, out into the frosty road; and Churleigh had lost both its daughters.

Leaholme drew her to his heart. "No more partings, oh, my love, that can embitter life for me. Give me one kiss, Sweet Heart, that I may know we are not travelling through an old, old dreamland I once knew. You have not given me one for many days."

"But you have, Douglas."

"That is nothing," he said, a wondrous content in his voice, "*I* cannot help myself, and I should like you to be weak too."

Her lips went up to meet his in one timid kiss, but that did not satisfy him.

"You know what your uncle decided," he said, laughing into her blushing face. "Leaholme never does exactly the thing you expect. Listen, darling! What a perfect clash of joy. I always knew it was the gayest peal in Herefordshire, and this is the gayest chime it ever rang. Why, Hessie, there is everybody at the open windows of the Rectory. Everybody, I declare. And now they are coming down the lawn to meet us. Dear, we must stop for this greeting. True friends are these, to both of us."

Pollie, regardless of the cold wind, or of her new wedding silk dragging the gravel, darted down to the gate; but she had nothing to say when she got there; she only seized Hessie's hand, and looked at her with a face full of unspoken words. The elder ladies, with the ribbons of their new especial wedding caps flying all in one direction, followed her; and Lord Leaholme left his seat courteously and stood among them; while Aunt Phyllis put both her fluttering hands into the left one that he gave her, and burst into an irrepressible little attack of hysterics.

Such a good-bye it was! Years afterwards Pollie used to describe it to her children so proudly yet so tenderly, that they never knew whether to laugh or cry.

"Think of us at your New Year's party, please Mrs. Goldsmith," said Leaholme, as he took his seat again, "and you must make up your mind to invite us to the next, or we may come in unawares, as Delahoyde and I did last year. Delahoyde, dear fellow, God has been good to us both since then."

"He has sent me many blessings," said Hugh, reverently, "but none greater than your friendship, dear my lord."

"Hester," said Leaholme, as they drove on, Aunt Phyllis's small shoe falling fortunately a long way short of the stately man and maid who sat at the back of the carriage, but seen and appreciated by Brandt, who turned round from his seat on the box and acknowledged it with a courteous bow.

"Hester, it must be true that the sorrows of our lives are mostly blessings in disguise. That happy little wife is nearer to her husband now, even than she was before."

But Hessie could not answer, for they had met with another interruption, a greater and more serious one this time. The village street was lined and crowded with eager watchers, and the carriage came to a sudden stop.

"I have promised to tell you, my lord," said Mr. Newling, coming up on horseback, and leaning bareheaded to the window, "that

your people—though they do not expect or wish you to speak to them now—wish to tell you how they look forward to your return in health again; and wish to show to you, before you leave, their gratitude,—the only return, they say, that they can give for all your lordship does for them. And they wish me too,” he added, his bow a little lower, “to give their humble greeting to their Lady.”

“Thank you,” returned Hessie, with a bright blush, as she leaned forward and gave the agent her hand in her pretty girlish simplicity, “Please thank them for me.”

“Tell them I could not have had a pleasanter message as a good-bye, will you, Newling?” said Leaholme, quietly, “and tell them this day is always to be a holiday among them. And through the winter, Newling, you will care for them all. I know there is no need to remind you of this. Good bye.”

“Good-bye, my lord. I will remember all.”

Mr. Newling sat still bareheaded on his horse, as the carriage went on towards the station; and the people, who had so thoughtfully held back, clustered round him for their master's message.

"I don't like the look of his face yet," he muttered, as the bells vibrated over his head, "I wonder when it will have the old strong, sunburnt look again. Well, he has his wish at last. I always prophesied this; for she's the only lady I ever saw who was quite the sort for him. What a picture her face was when I gave him his tenants' message."

CHAPTER XXII.

IN the early darkness of the winter evening the Leaholme bells pealed merrily across the frosty landscape; and here too the people came out into the road to watch the return of their master with his bride—to watch only though; for Brandt had peremptorily forbidden the horses being taken out of the carriage, or any noisy demonstration made, and his orders were thoughtfully obeyed. But they watched with a great deal of curiosity here; for the people of Leaholme had not seen the Earl since the Spring, and he had been wounded and ill since then; and then his bride they had not seen at all. Rather

slowly the carriage drove through the town, but without stopping ; and there rose one long, glad cheer from a hundred voices. In the faint lamp light some quick eyes caught sight of the bright little face at the Earl's side, and another cheer followed, as hearty, if not quite so loud.

"For the Countess ! Do you hear, my darling ?" he asked, smiling into her astonished eyes. "How they will love my little Countess soon."

"Hush, Douglas, don't call me that."

"If it hurts your pride to fall so rapidly from a queen to a countess," he answered seriously, "I will make an effort to remember. Here we are at home ! Sweet, this is Lea-holme."

But Hester's eyes took in little of the Castle ; they saw nothing but the surprised looks the servants cast into their master's face as he walked through them with her.

Alone in the beautiful drawing-rooms, Hester stood before one of the fires

very silent, trying to banish this one sad thought before he should join her. But only a few minutes had she stood thus when he came up in the quietness and the rich softened light, and drew the dainty white figure into his arms.

"Alone together at last, my queen. Alone, and at home. How cleverly you tried to escape me after dinner; but it is too late ever to hope to escape me now. Hester, are you glad we are at home?"

"Yes."

He looked down quickly into her thoughtful face, and his eyes filled with indescribable tenderness.

"Yes; I see you are glad, dearest."

"I feel very small in this large place, Douglas; but it *does* feel exactly home,—I suppose, because it is your home, and tells me many things of you."

He drew her closer, with a little laugh.

"Love, look straight into my eyes. Do I look restless now?"

"Restless? No; why, Douglas?"

"Because when you spoke to me first you rebuked me for doing so. You thought I had been to many places, and would go to many more, you said, for I looked still unsatisfied. Dearest, I am satisfied at last."

"Why do you remember those things?" she asked, with a quick, frightened look into his face.

"Because I knew it was so true. Unsatisfied I always was; little deserving the rest I have found at last."

"Oh! Douglas, the things I said to you then could never have been true, because it was not really you I spoke of, but someone I—I used to think you were."

"They often fitted me rather painfully, especially that one. Is there peace upon my face at last, sweet?"

She was still looking into his eyes, and the love that deepened and gladdened them looked back at him through hers.

"Well, darling wife?"

"It is—it is not a sad face to-day."

"It must be a very, very happy one, I think. Hester, will you tell me what you were thinking of as you stood here forgetting me entirely, and hoping I had forgotten you?"

"I was wondering, I think; only wondering," she answered, slowly, "what my life would have been if God had not given you to me at the last, and—"

"And, then?"

"Oh! one's thoughts go wandering into all sorts of labyrinths sometimes, you know," she said, very quickly. "Where are yours now?"

"I was wondering, I think—only wondering," he mimicked, gaily, "if my wife could ever really know—how precious she is to me."

"Yes, she knows, Douglas," the sweet voice answered, brightly; "because she knows how weakly you judge her. Whereas all the same she knows she is but a— Don't

interrupt; it is a very rude thing to do. Would it be ludicrous to quote Shakespeare on such a subject?"

"Very—the subject being so insignificant; but have you found a portrait of yourself?"

"Yes, in Portia; for I am 'Happy in this, I am not yet so old but I may learn; and happier than this, I am not bred so dull but I can learn. Happiest of all in that my spirit commits itself to yours to be directed.'"

"Never leave words out when you quote, please. It is 'gentle spirit.'"

"Oh! I hope it is," she answered, earnestly. "It should be, Douglas."

"Hessie," said Leaholme, turning away his eyes involuntarily as she looked up with such a world of brave and tender love in the young face, "I know into what labyrinth those thoughts had wandered when I came in. My cherished wife, the life that seems to lie so bright before us is not all. In the longer, brighter one that follows shall we not be together still? My darling knows and feels this, in her faith and trust?"

"Oh ! Douglas," she cried, with a pitiful drawing down of her eyebrows, "they all say that this winter in the South will make you strong again."

"So they do, dear," he answered, softly, laying the troubled face against his own, "and I feel sure that they are right. I was much stronger and healthier in old days than—than most men ; and this strength has been taken from me only when a great happiness came to take its place. It almost seems as it it would be too much to have both ; and yet every day I feel the old strength coming slowly back. I do, indeed, my cherished little nurse ; and you yourself will see how rapidly it follows in our happy footsteps."

"I know you would not tell me this unless you really felt it, Douglas," she whispered, looking into his face with her eyes full of perfect and complete trust. "*You* could not speak untruthfully even to make me happy. For me, your face has just its old, old look even now."

She had her hands clasped round his arm,

and he bent and kissed again and again the earnest little lips.

"Hessie," he said presently, with a bright change in his voice, "I am going to sing to you; but you must be content with a bass accompaniment—a very base accompaniment as you will say; but I will not be indebted to you for this one, as it requires a skill which you cannot be expected to possess. I am going to sing the song I sang you on that first day, when you nipped me so very persistently and scornfully."

"You never sang a song to me, Douglas."

"I never sang or played to anyone else when you were present. Did you not understand that, my queen?"

"I suppose I would not understand. I will when you play to me again. What happy music we have had to-day, Douglas."

She sat upon the rug, looking laughingly back at him as he played a few bars of the "Wedding March" with one hand. But gradually her eyes went back to the ruddy

coals, and she sat quite still and motionless, listening with full heart as he began the air she had heard for the first time on the day when she first saw him; and had never heard since. That night came back to her vividly in a wondrous contrast to this; and all the doubt and sorrow of the months between melted and vanished in the glad content which filled her heart, and lent a new, strange power to every note she listened to.

“On a summer day did I earliest meet her,
 I know all the words that she first did say;
 By a dear, dear name I have learnt to greet her,
 I knew not then, but ‘tis come to-day.
 With this self-same firelight shining upon her,
 Streaming down on her ringlets athen,
 She is sitting near me. She whom I honour,
 She that I waited for, my Queen.
 I never dreamed of her tall and stately,
 She that I love is so fairy light;
 I cannot picture her walk sedately,
 Yet whatever she does is sure to be right.
 And I found her courteous. I found her holy.
 Pure in her spirit, that maiden I love.
 Whether her birth had been noble or lowly,
 I cared no more than the spirit above.
 And I’ve given my heart to my lady’s keeping,
 And ever her strength on mine shall lean.
 And the stars shall fall, and the Angels be weeping,
 Ere I cease to love her, my Queen.”

“I beg to inform you, Hester Arrandel, that

the words of that song are copyright ; therefore you have no right to copy, however much you may be tempted. Do you fully comprehend?" asked the Earl, turning gravely on his seat, and looking rather inquisitively into Hester's half-hidden face.

No ready answer came.

"What did you say?"

"I did not speak, Douglas."

"Oh! you were going to, I suppose?"

"No. Why?"

"I am expecting a reply—or an encore."

He had left the piano then, and was leaning against the chimney-piece, looking with a half-smile down upon her while she still kept her face half hidden.

There was a few minutes' silence, then he laid his left hand on her bent head.

"Dear one, look up and give me an answer to my song."

She took the caressing hand in hers, and laid her little warm, bright cheek upon it; but she did not even then look up as she spoke.

"I don't think, Douglas, that the stars—will ever fall—nor that the Angels—will ever be weeping."

"Nor that?— Go on, my dearest."

"Nor that—you will ever cease to love me."

"One thing more, my wife. Nor that?"

"Nor that—I *can* ever cease to love you."

THE END.

